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BIRCH DENE.

VOL. III.

BIRCH DENE.

A Novel.

BY
WILLIAM WESTALL,

AUTHOR OF
"HER TWO MILLIONS," "RED RYVINGTON," "NIGEL FORTESCUE,"
"JOHN BROWN AND LARRY LOHENGRIN," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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BIRCH DENE.

CHAPTER I.

WILL ROMFORD.

A FEW mornings after the visit to the Hall and the upsetting of the carriage, Robin was in the engine-house at Birch Dene. He liked to see the engine started, sometimes even started it himself, which he considered rather a feat; for the engine, though regarded as a wonderful production, was a very complicated piece of mechanism, and "setting it on" and getting the crank safely "over the centre" required very nice management.

Robert Ruberry was also present.

"Now, Jim, it's about time," he said, after looking at his watch.

It was before the time; but when Old

Bob did not gain ten minutes or more at the beginning of the day, and as many at the close, he felt worse at ease with himself than if he had omitted going to church on the previous Sunday, or missed saying his prayers the night before.

Jim put down the oil-can with which he had been oiling the bearings, and, standing by the cylinder, took the handle of the throttle-valve in one hand, and that of the "exhaust" in the other.

"Hold on! For Heaven's sake, hold on!" shouted Robin, at the same time pushing up Jim's hand, which was in the very act of opening the valve.

"Why, what's to do?"

"Look at those wheels."

A bar of iron had been placed between the main driving wheels in such a way as, but for Robin's sharpness of vision and presence of mind, would almost certainly have caused a disastrous breakdown.

"By gum, that's a corker!" exclaimed Jim, as he removed the bar.

“What ill-contrived devil can have done this? By Heaven, if I find him out, he shall swing for it!” said Old Bob, fiercely. “I dare say it’s one of the apprentices. I thought no good would come of so much pampering—hospitals, reading, and such-like. But now, not a word of this to anybody. We must hold our tongues and keep our eyes open. Them as has tried this once will try it again. Our game is to catch ’em, not to flay [frighten] ’em. You have saved us from a great loss, Nelson. It was well done, and I shall not forget it. Set on, Jim, or else they’ll think as there’s summat wrong.”

Mr. Robert said no more, but his stern, preoccupied look showed that he was thinking how he could best detect the culprit, and guard against a repetition of the danger. But on the following day there occurred an accident which gave him something else to think about, and could in nowise be ascribed to malevolence. One of the boiler-plates blew out, and entailed a stoppage of several days.

Robin profited by this unexpected holiday to pay his proposed visit to Romford, as well to warn the weaver of the peril that threatened him as to ask his advice, in accordance with the suggestion made by Miriam, from whom he had received a letter which ran thus—

“To Mr. Rupert Nelson.

“DEAR BROTHER,

“I have asked my father the question you know of. It seemed greatly to surprise him. He said that he could not think how I had got such an idea into my head. Had Colonel Dene been previously married, my father would surely have known, and he has not the least doubt that Mrs. Dene is his first and only wife. I have also spoken to Mrs. Sirricold, and though she said much more than my father, it was to the same effect. She seems to know a great deal about the Ravensmeres. Though not wealthy, they are of ancient lineage and highly connected. Colonel Dene served at one time in the Marines, and was nearly forty when he married. This seems very strange, and you would do well, I think, to

consult with Romford before doing anything further.

“Your friend and well-wisher,
“M. R.”

“P.S.—I should be glad to hear, so soon as convenient, what Romford advises and how you propose to act. I much regret that I am unable to give you more help.”

Robin read this letter with a sense of disappointment; it seemed so cold and formal—not at all like a letter from an affectionate sister. The postscript, however, consoled him somewhat. It showed, he thought, that he still had Miriam’s sympathy, and that her belief in his story was unshaken. Nevertheless, he could not disguise from himself that she was right in thinking the news she had heard very strange. If Colonel Dene was his father he must have been married to his mother; yet those who ought to know said that he had been married only once. On the other hand, now he had learnt that the Colonel was at one time in the Marines, the conclusion that he was really his father seemed

almost irresistible. It was, in truth, "very strange." Robin could not see his way at all, and he went on his visit to the weaver with a perturbed and anxious mind.

Romford lived some two miles across the fields, in a white, one-storeyed cottage, with diamond-shaped panes, a bit of garden in front, bounded by a hedgerow, and entered by a little green gate. The garden was evidently an object of loving care, but the time being winter and the day dull, it wore a somewhat dreary and desolate look.

As Robin opens the gate, he hears the monotonous cliketty-clack, cliketty-clack of a pair of hand-loom. With superfluous politeness (considering the custom of the countryside), he knocks at the door—which is furnished with a sloping weather-board, to prevent the ingress of wind and rain—knocks several times; but, perceiving that his knocks are lost in the rattle of the looms, he lifts the latch and steps into the "living room." The biggest thing in it is a four-post bedstead, the next a chest of drawers, and next

to that a case-clock. There are, further, a one-legged mahogany table, a dresser, a hanging bookcase, a few rush-bottomed chairs, and, before the fire, in a rocking-chair, sits a golden-haired little girl fast asleep, holding on her lap a small kitten.

It was a charming picture, and, after pausing a moment to gaze on it, Robin stepped to the open doorway of the "shop," where the weaver and his wife were toiling away as if for bare life. Presently, as Romford stopped to change shuttles, he caught sight of his visitor.

"Hello, Mr. Nelson!" he exclaimed. "Is that you?"

"I have brought back the *Marmion* you were good enough to lend me," answered Robin. "I have read it with great pleasure, but I fear I have kept it an unconscionably long time."

"Oh, that's nowt. You could ha' kept it longer if you'd ha' liked. I'm fain it's pleased you. I knew it would. Willn't you sit down a bit?"

Whereupon Romford rose from his loom, and shook hands with his guest. The weaver, as he stood up in his check shirt, open at the throat, and his fustian breeches loose at the knees, looked every inch a man; for he was long-limbed and broad-shouldered, more than six feet in height, and had a genial, good-humoured face, yet shrewd and resolute withal.

“Sit you down, I pray you now, and let us have a bit of a camp.”

“Thank you,” said Robin, acting on the invitation; “but you are busy. You must not let me take you from your work.”

“You willn’t do that. I wor boun’ to give o’er. I’ve been hard at it sin’ afore dayleet, and am fain of an excuse to lake a bit. We handloom weavers are like the beggar in the song—when we are tired we can sit us down and rest; and we are neither under overlookers nor tied to a bell, thank Heaven. Come, Susan; stop thy noise, and draw us a stoup of ale. I dare say he’ll find thy brew welly as good as Jim Rabbits’.”

(The weaver, as a rule, spoke broad Lancashire, considering it far more expressive than ordinary English, into which, nevertheless, he occasionally lapsed, either out of compliment to his visitor, or to show that he could "talk grammar" as well as anybody—as indeed he could.)

Mrs. Romford, a bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked, flaxen-haired young woman, laid down her picking stick and went into the buttery to execute her husband's order.

"You have seen my wife," he continued. "This is our only child"—(pointing to the little lass in the rocking-chair). "We call her Susie, to distinguish her from her mother, whose name is Susan. Our abode is not palatial, as you see. This is both living room and bedchamber. Save the shop and the buttery, we have no others. However, we are contented with our lot, Susan and I; and that, I take it, is better than being rich beyond the dreams of avarice—to quote a saying of the great lexicographer. Here comes th' wife with a jug of foaming ale. Let me pledge

you in a mug of home-brewed, Mr. Nelson ! Naa, what thinken yo,' isn't Susan's tap as good as Jim Rabbits' ? ”

Robin protested (with truth, for he was very thirsty) that it was the best brew he had ever tasted.

“ Ay, my Susan can brew and bake wi' onybody. But it isn't much soft bread as we gotten here—mostly oatcake and porridge, and furmitty and a bit o' bacon and garden stuff, when there is ony. Not as we couldn't afford better fare, just now ; but there's no telling how soon work may be slack ageean, and I spend a sight o' brass i' books. Th' wife's olus flighting me for it, and I'm olus repenting—and helping to pave hell. How is it as you've gotten off so soon to-day ? Has Robert Ruberry gan yo' a holiday ? Oh, a boiler-plate has brasted, has it ? That'll be two or three days of a job, I reckon. Well, as yo're at a loose end, and th' weyving 'll wait, what sayen yo' to a walk on th' moors ? I want to stretch my legs a bit. They're stiff wi' sitting and treddling.”

“With pleasure,” said Robin. It was exactly what he wanted.

“Aw reyt. Tak’ a book twothry minutes while I wash and don mysel’. Which will yo’ have? My favourite poet, my favourite novelist, or my favourite politician?”

“That is like asking me to buy a pig in a poke. Condescend to particulars, and I will give you an answer.”

“That is easily done: Burns, Fielden, and Cobbett.”

“Thank you. I’ll take a volume of Fielden.”

“Here’s *Tom Jones*! It is a rare book. I’ve read it many a time. Fielden gives us both humour and human nature; and novels as hasna gotten tone or t’other, is summat like a mon as has nayther brains nor guts. Fot my shoon, Susan; I’m going into th’ buttery to wesh mysel’.”

Ten minutes later Romford emerged from the buttery with combed locks and well-washed face, and clad in a costume not unlike that which, a few years ago, was affected

by well-to-do Irish peasants—a long-tailed coat, bright-coloured waistcoat, curduroy breeches, and a tall, weather-beaten beaver.

“We’s e be back to’ard six or seven o’clock, Susan,” he said, as he took a thick stick from behind the door. “We’s e be back to’ard six or seven o’clock, and as Mr. Nelson is going to tak’ pot-luck wi’ us, thou’d best mak’ them pig-trotters ready. We’s e be as hungry as neet-hunters at breakfast-time when we getten back. Come on! We’ll go down th’ loin and strike across th’ moors, and have a gradely good raand.”

“I like those moors,” went on the weaver, as they strode at a great pace down the fenceless lane. “They are wild and lonesome, it is true, and in winter time drear and wild; but the air as blows o’er ’em is fresh and keen, the view is hindered neither by hedgerows nor gardens, and the sense of being free to wander where I will makes me feel as glad and joyous as a skylayrock.”

“I hope you will keep your freedom,” said Robin, seeing his opportunity; “and

one of my objects in coming here to-day is to warn you that it is in some danger.

“My freedom in danger! What mean you?” exclaimed Romford, stopping short, and turning right-about face.

Robin repeated what he had heard from Colonel Dene.

“I’m much obliged to Colonel Dene,” said the weaver, resuming his walk, “and if you see him again, say as I said so, and as I shall not forget his kindness. But tell him, at th’ same time, as Bill Romford will stand to his guns.”

“You mean you won’t go away?”

“I do. Why should I? I have only exercised that right of free speech which is, or should be, th’ privilege of every Englishman. I am a reformer, not a revolutionist. I have always discountenanced violence. I belong to no secret society, and I am as loyal as th’ head constable himself. All I ask for, all as I ever asked for, is such a reform of Parliament as will mak’ it a truly representative assembly. That obtained, all the

rest—a short-time Act, repeal of th’ Corn Laws, reduction of expenditure—will follow. Them’s my principles, Nelson, and I’m nayther going to shut my mouth nor cut my stick. What would be th’ use? I couldn’t addle owt onywhere else, and I’m not going to cadge for my living. Let ’em tak’ me if they like, and I dare say they will. I can bide i’ prison if onybody else can, and they will not stop reform by shutting me up. A mon as is not ready to suffer for his principles doesn’t deserve to have ony. Th’ wife can addle porridge for hersel’ and Susie wi’ the odd loom. I’s not loave ’em till I’m forced, and I shall happen not be forced just yet. There’s not going to be a meeting i’ these parts nayther this week nor next. We’re going to howd one next Sunday ‘over the border,’ at th’ top o’ Blackstone Edge, wheer the Manchester head constable cannot mell [meddle] wi’ us.”

“But willn’t he hear of it?”

“Ay, after it’s o’er; and gradely mad he’ll be. But we mean to have a meeting at Birch

Dene one o' these days, and then he'll be madder than ever, rank owd tyrant as he is. You willn't miss conveying to Colonel Dene my sense of his kindness. Where do you say you saw him?"

"At his own house."

"At his own house! What wor yo' doing theer—if it's a fair question?"

"I made his acquaintance quite accidentally, when I first came to Birch Dene. He seemed to take an interest in so much of my story as I told him, and the other day he asked me up to the Hall."

"The kind-hearted gentleman! He is kind-hearted, too, from all accounts. I'm not surprised as he took an interest in you. Mony a one has wondered what browt yo' these parts, and I'm one on 'em."

"That means you would like to know. Well, I well tell you; but you must do something for me in return."

"To be sure I will, if I can. What is it?"

"Give me your advice. I'm in great perplexity, and I want the advice of some-

body older and more experienced than myself. Will you?"

"Ay, will I. I'm as ready as onybody else to give what costs me nowt. Say your say, and I'll tell you my mind. Two yeds is better than one, if there's owt in th' second."

Whereupon Robin told his story from the beginning, keeping nothing back save his intimacy with Miriam, and concluded by asking Romford whether he thought it would be expedient to make himself known to Colonel Dene.

CHAPTER II.

THE HUSH SHOP.

“WELL,” said the weaver, when Robin (who was becoming quite an adept at narration) had finished his story, “tak’ it aw in aw, it’s about the quarest yarn as ever I yerd. Let’s walk on quiet, twothry minutes, while I unravel it a bit. It’s a case as requires consideration. . . . Tell me now, Nelson, have you any sort of proof that you are what you say you are—that your name is Ravensmere? Not as I have the least doubt of your good faith. There’s genuine sincerity in your e’en, and the ring of truth in your voice, to say nowt of th’ fact that you can have no interest in humbugging me. But we live in a sceptical age, and a scrap o’ papper goes a long way.”

“I have nothing whatever to show, Romford. My mother had a letter, which I dare say, in case of need, could be produced ; but my name—the name of Ravensmere—is not mentioned in it. I must be believed on my word, or not at all.”

“I believe every word you have said, Nelson, and, what’s more, I feel welly sure as Colonel Dene is your father.”

“But if he has only been married once, how can he be ?”

“How can they know as he has been married but once ? And there’s another point—I don’t want to hurt your feelings, and you mustn’t tak’ amiss what I’m going to say. You have asked my advice, and I’m bound to speak plain. The Colonel may have been wed but once, and be your father all th’ same.”

“You — you surely don’t mean . . .” gasped Robin, as the terrible significance of Romford’s words flashed in his mind.

“I mean nowt else. It isn’t a nice thing to say ; but don’t you think it’s quite possible

as your father and mother were never wed at all?"

"No, no; it is not possible. I cannot believe it—I will not believe it," exclaimed the young fellow, passionately. "My mother always spoke of my father as her husband—as a brave officer and a noble gentleman. But if it be as you say, he is a scoundrel, and I owe him naught but hate."

"Nay, nay—I wouldn't say that. Because a man has sinned once—ay, or a hundred times, that doesn't make him a scoundrel. Who is there that's reached middle-age as hasn't done things as he'd give years of his life to undo? Doesn't th' Owd Book say as there's more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-and-nine just men? So long as a mon doesn't deliberately prefer evil to good, I don't think he should be called a scoundrel; and so far as we know, Colonel Dene is owt but a scoundrel. Mind, I don't say it is so; but as you've asked me to sit in the seat of judgment, it's a side of the question which it's my duty to

consider. But there's one thing clear. Your father—if Colonel Dene be your father—has some strong motive for keeping his marriage with your mother secret. When a man hushes up the most important event of his life, you may depend on it there's summat behind."

"What would you advise me to do, then?" said Robin, faintly, and in a tone of deep discouragement.

"Get to know the truth as soon as you can. Go to Colonel Dene, tell him your name, and all as has happened to you."

"But if it should be as you say, I would rather not go near Colonel Dene. I owe him neither duty nor affection . . ."

"Stop, stop, my lad—not quite so fast! I did not say as it was so. I nobbut said it might be so, just to prepare you for th' worst. And you're like to go to him. Nobody else can tell you who you are. The truth, however unpleasant, is easier to bear than doubt and suspense. You get used to th' one, never to th' t'other."

“But will he tell me th’ truth?”

“Well, I don’t think Colonel Dene will deny his own son, and if he isn’t your fayther, he’s th’ most likely mon to tell you who is. If there be another William Ravensmere of th’ same age who served in the Marines at th’ same time as he did, he’s sure to know. Ay, tell him by aw means. Yo’ll not be content now till you know th’ worst. And what if him and your mother worn’t wed? It wouldn’t be your fault.”

“Oh, but you don’t know how I have thought of my father—how I have exalted him in my mind!” cried Robin, piteously. “I could have loved him so much. I want so much to love him. I have nobody else; but if he deceived my mother—you have no idea how good she was, Romford, and how she loved him—if he deceived my mother, I should hate and despise him, and I would never bear his name—never.”

“Come, come—there’s no call to tak’ on i’ that way,” said Romford, soothingly. “Let us not meet trouble hoaf way, whatever we

do. If I'd ha' had any idea as you'd tak' it so rough I wouldn't ha' said nowt. And I'm happen wrong . . . Bithmon, when I come to give it moor thowt, I'm cocksure I'm wrong."

But this well-meant attempt at consolation came too late. The iron had entered Robin's soul; he answered at random, and they walked silently on, each absorbed in his own thoughts, heedless alike of the deepening twilight and the ominous mist which, for the last hour, had veiled the Yorkshire hills, and was now creeping over the moor.

Romford was the first to speak.

"Hello! Howd on!" he exclaimed, as the sun disappeared behind an opaque mass of ragged cloud, which loomed on the horizon like an impassable wall. "Howd on! It'll be as dark as a dungeon in five or ten minutes. I know my way middling well, but when th' sun goes out and a fog comes on, these moors are dangerous. They're full o' bog-holes, and, according to some folks, haunted by boggarts. Come on. Let's hark back by th' nearest road and put th' best

foot foremost while we can see what we're doing."

As he spoke the weaver increased his pace to a run, Robin keeping abreast with him; and they went on thus until the gloaming was swallowed up in darkness and mist, and they were compelled to reduce their pace to a cautious walk.

"This is confoundedly awkward," exclaimed Romford, as he felt for the path with his feet. "It wor gradely goamless on us to walk on with our een shut and get lost i' this fashion. If we can make th' White Gate or th' Owd Moorcock Inn we shall do. But we are as like as not to be rambling hereabouts till th' mist clears off and th' moon comes aat, or we can catch a glimpse o' th' north star. But there's no use stonning still. Let's potter on; we'se get somewheer, somehow."

The words were hardly uttered when both Robin and himself floundered into a hole.

"There! Didn't I tell you so?" he laughed, as he scrambled out. "We're no waur this time; but if we don't keep a better

look aat, there'll ayther be broken bones or a couple of handsome corpses for the crowner's jury to sit on."

After this they went on, creeping, groping, blundering, and stumbling for an hour or more, falling over molehills, running foul of trees, barking their shins against stone walls, yet making so little progress withal, that, as Romford put it, there was every likelihood of their having to lie out all night.

"If we could nobbut see a leet," he groaned, after coming a particularly bad cropper over a tree root—"if we could nobbut see a leet, we'd mak' for it, wherever it wor. . . . Bithmon, I believe I yerd summat. Didn't yo'?"

"I am sure I did—voices—people talking. I can hear them now. . . . There they are again. I will shout," said Robin.

"No, no! Durned shaat! Let's harken a bit fost," answered the weaver, in a whisper. "They're happen neet-hunters or tramps, or waur? There's quare characters upo' this moor sometimes. Let's creep to'ard 'em, and harken afore we speyk."

The wisdom of this proposal was evident, so the two went forward cautiously, until they were near enough to hear what was being said.

“Wheer hav’ we gotten to?” one of the invisibles was saying.

“I’ll be hanged if I know,” exclaimed another; “but we shouldn’t be far fro’ Red Nell’s. We’ve a lantern, and if we could nobbut get a leet, I could find th’ pad in a minute. Has ony on yo’ a flint and steel?”

“No, but I’ll tell thee what: if onybody has a hoily rag, or owt o’ that soort, I could happen mak’ a bit of a blaze wi’ flashing my pistol.”

“Flash away, then. I’ve gotten a bit of owd Ruberry’s waste i’ my pocket. If a spark falls on it, it’ll blaze like hell. Here it is!”

“Howd on a minute. Let me draw th’ charge fost, or I’s happen be blowing some o’ yer yeds off.”

“Ay, keep thy powder for Owd Bob; thou may blow his yed off if thou likes.”

“I mean to do, one o’ these neets, and if I

don't, somebody else will; and it'll be a damned sight better than he desarves, th' owd tyrant."

"Ay, will it. He desarves his shins punching, and then boiling wick in one of his own boilers."

"He's most terrible mad cause o' that plate brasting, but there'll be waur brasts afore long, if he doesn't mind what he's doing."

"Ay, we'll brun th' factory o'er his yed one o' these neets. It's aw along o' factories, and new-fangled machinery, and sich-like, as poor folk is so ill off. But there'll be a revolution in Lunnon afore long, and then we'se get our reyts."

"Naa, then, wheer's th' lantern? Theer! it's sweeling. Leet th' candle afore it goes aat."

"Crouch down under th' wall, or they'll be seeing us," whispered Romford. "Now, they've set off; we mun keep th' leet i' view and follow 'em. It looks as if there wor some quare work going on. Who are they, I wonder?"

“Some of our hands.”

“One or two happen, but not aw. That mon wi’ th’ pistol isn’t one, I’ll be bound. Come on, let’s follow ’em up; but don’t talk, and mak’ no more noise than yo’ can help.”

They followed as stealthily as Red Indians on the war path, always keeping the lantern in view, until they perceived, afar off, another light, which grew more distinct as they went on, and evidently proceeded from a building, the shadowy outline of which it dimly revealed.

“They’ve gone in,” said Romford, as the lantern disappeared. “We’ll go in too, but we mun wait a bit fost. It’s Red Nell’s. Let’s go forrud and have a peep through th’ window.”

It was as strange an interior as could well be imagined. A long, low room, with bare rafters and whitewashed walls; a fire of logs and peat, shooting lurid tongues of flame up a wide-throated chimney; men sitting and lying about, some on up-ended barrels, others on trusses of straw; a party of card-players,

round a table, made of an old door supported on trestles; in one corner several casks on stillages; in another a pair of double-barrelled guns propped against the wall; near them a brace of hares and five or six birds, the spoils of illicit chase, and a couple of sleeping dogs. Among the men were two or three who, as Romford whispered, looked like night-hunters, and several colliers, whose flannel garments and black faces showed that they had come straight from the pit.

On the only chair in the room sat a big, gaunt woman, with tousled red hair, and a still redder face, smoking a short black pipe.

“That’s Red Nell,” said Romford. “Come away; if we look any moor, they’ll happen be seeing us, and then there’d be the devil to pay.”

“A strange sort of inn, isn’t it?”

“It isn’t an inn; it is a hush shop—a place where they retail bad spirits without license, a cheep neet-haas for tramps and vagabonds, wheer gambling and aw soorts o’ manks is

carried on, and a mon can get fuddled for about fourpence, and dead drunk for a shilling. Let's go in; I don't think they'll hurt us. I want to find out who them chaps is as is going to shoot Bob Ruberry. They're making a most terrible din."

"Good-neet to you aw!" said Romford, as he opened the door.

The clamour stilled instantly. The gamblers ceased their playing and hid their cards, and Red Nell sprang from her chair.

"Who are yo', and what wanten yo'?" she shouted.

"We are just two wanderers as has lost our way on th' moor, and we want nowt but a bite and a sup."

"It's a lie! You are gaugers. They are gaugers, lads, come to spy——"

Several of the men sprang to their feet and "went for" the intruders. The gamblers, in their hurry, overturned the table, sending the two bottles that served as candlesticks crashing on the floor, and the hounds, barking loudly, joined in the fray.

“That’s it! Kill ’em! Throttle ’em. Hide ’em! Punch ’em till they cannot stan’!” screamed Red Nell; and it looked very much as if there were going to be battle, murder, and sudden death, for the night-hunters had seized their guns, and all, with threatening gestures, were crowding round the new-comers.

“Hold on, chaps!” said Romford, good-humouredly, as he pushed the foremost back. “You were ne’er more mista’en i’ your lives. We are nayther gaugers nor blackfaces (spies). Is theer nobody here as knows Will Romford?”

“Ay is there; but th’ hoyle is so dark we couldn’t mak’ yo’ out afore yo’ spoke. It’s aw reyt, lads; Bill Romford ’ll tell no tales. Let him sit down, and give him summat to sup.”

“But what are they doing here at this time o’ neet?” demanded Red Nell, suspiciously.

“That is soon told. We geet lost on th’ moor, and made for th’ fost leet as we seed, and coom in to wet wer whistles and ax somebody to put us i’ th’ road home.”

“And who is this young spark?” (pointing to Robin).

“One of Ruberry’s ’prentices,” answered another fellow. “They’ve made him a bit of a mayster lately; but I don’t think as he’ll split. He’s weel thowt on by th’ hands.”

“Can yo’ keep a still tongue, young mon?” asked the woman, sternly.

“You may trust me,” answered Robin, quietly.

“Ay, you may trust him,” added the weaver; “I’ll answer for Nelson.”

“Come up to th’ fire. You can sit down upo’ them barrels. What shall I draw for you?”

Romford asked for two mugs of ale and some oat-cake, whereupon the drinkers resumed their interrupted conversation, the gamblers their playing, and all went on as if nothing had happened. Two or three fellows lay fast asleep in the straw, and in a small room adjoining the house part of the hush-shop were several others who, judging by the din they made, were both drinking

deeply and talking largely. Robin recognized two or three of the Birch Dene hands, one of whom was Black Jack, his quondam opponent. He fancied, too, that among the sleepers in the straw was Blincoe, but in the dim light of the place he could not make sure, and neither Romford nor himself was able to identify the people whose portentous conversation they had overheard on the moor.

Of all the company, one man only was neither eating, drinking, smoking, nor sleeping! He sat apart, and seemed so lonesome and melancholy that Robin invited him to join them—which the man did, with evident pleasure, and gladly accepted an offer of cake and ale.

“To tell th’ truth,” he said, “I have but twopence on me—just enough for my neet’s lodgings; and what’s worse, I’m on the wrong side o’ my dinner.”

“That’s bad! No wonder you don’t look up to th’ mark,” said the weaver. “Knock some o’ this hard bread into yo’; and when

you've supped that ale you shall have another mug. You're out o' work, I reckon?"

"Well, work is most uncommon scarce. But I'm not a factory hand nor yet a weaver. My name is Dooley—Dr. Dooley. I dare say you've yerd tell on me. I come fro' Frog Fold."

"So I have. You're a yerb doctor?"

"Ay, what they call a quack. But I'm reckoned to be a good hand with a lancet and a pair of forceps for aw that. I go about selling simples, and drawing teeth and bleeding folks. But as I said just now, work is scarce. Nobody seems to be badly, or to want my physic. It is wrong time o' th' year for bleeding, and I haven't drawn a tooth for a month or more. . . . Ay, things is gradely bad wi' me; and th' worst of it is as I've left a wife and two little childer clemming at home, and I'm like to go back to 'em as empty as I set off."

"I'm sorry for that. It's hard to hear of little childer clemming. Here, tak' this sixpence, doctor. I'm a poor mon mysel', or I'd mak' it more."

“And here are two shillings,” added Robin, compassionately. “It is all I have in my pocket, I’m sorry to say; but if it will be of any use to you——”

“Thank you kindly—thank you kindly, both on you,” murmured the quack, as tears of gratitude sprang to his eyes. “It’ll be a bite and a sup for th’ little ’uns when I get home. And if so be as I can do ayther on you a good torn, I will. If ever you want letting blood or a tooth drawing, I’ll do it for nowt. You know my name—Dr. Dooley, fro’ Frog Fold. . . . I come here to-night partly because it’s chep, partly on th’ chance o’ picking up sixpence by bleeding somebody. A chap sometimes drinks hissel into a fit, and carding oft ends in a fight—— By gum! it looks like summat o’ th’ sort now.”

One of the gamblers had thrown his cards on the table, and was charging his opponent with cheating.

“I’ thou says I chet, I’ll wring thy neck for thee,” said the other, fiercely.

“It’ll tak’ two like thee to wring my neck, thou rat-catching thief; and then you willn’t do it. And for two pins I’d give thee a damned good hiding now.”

“I wish thou would, thou neet-hunting devil; I want some sore bones. I’ll feyt thee ony time, ony wheer, and ony end up.”

“I’m ready. I’ll tak’ thee ‘while thou art in the humour,’ as the song says.”

“Let’s have it out now,” answered the night-hunter, quietly, yet with resolute mien.

The onlookers were wild with excitement and delight.

“A feyt!—a feyt!” they shouted. “Doggy and Ratten’s going to feyt! Let’s go out into th’ croft and see fair play!”

Doggy was the poacher. Ratten was so called because he had once been a rat-catcher.

Torches were procured, lanterns lighted, and all sallied forth into a paddock behind the house—the scene of many a previous encounter. A ring was speedily formed, torch-bearers and lantern-holders to the front, and the two men, divested of their shirts, and

wearing only breeches, boots, and stockings, stepped into the arena. They were pretty evenly matched, almost the same height and age, and if Ratten had a slight advantage in weight, the balance was perhaps more than redressed by Doggy's greater agility and superior condition.

"If I wor a betting man," said Romford, "I'd back th' night-hunter. He's in better fettle than t'other."

Many did back him, but Ratten had also his friends, and nobody seemed disposed to offer odds. The betting was even.

The combatants did not "square" up to each other in the ordinary prize-fighting fashion. With outstretched arms and bended backs they stood for a moment glaring at each other, then commenced moving slowly round, watching for an opportunity to close. This went on several minutes, and the spectators, who had so far observed the most intense silence, began to show signs of impatience. At length Doggy, thinking he saw his chance, rushed in, gave his opponent a tremendous kick

below the knee, and locked him in a tight embrace. But Ratten stood his ground bravely, and the grip he gave the poacher seemed like to crush in his ribs. After a fierce bout of tugging, straining, and kicking, both fell heavily on the turf, Doggy undermost. Yet he kept his hold until Ratten, removing one of his hands, seized his man by the windpipe, and throttled him till his eyes nearly started from his head. But when almost, as it seemed, at the last gasp, Doggy contrived, by a convulsive effort, to free himself.

Both men were on their legs at the same moment, and without any preliminary dodging or "dogging," flew at each other like wild beasts, plying fists and foot with might and main. The blows on their shins sounded like the breaking of sticks, and their stockings were dyed with blood. Then they closed a second time, and after a desperate struggle, in which they went the entire round of the ring, Ratten was hurled so violently to the ground that the blood gushed from his ears

and nostrils, and he lay to all appearance dead.

“My God, I’ve killed him!” exclaimed the night-hunter, kneeling beside his fallen foe. “I’ve killed him! Speyk, Kit! I bore him no malice. It wor a fair feyt. We wor olus good friends afore to-neet.”

And the rough fellow, who had fought so pluckily and borne so much punishment without flinching, burst into tears.

“Let me look at him—let me look at him!” exclaimed a voice, which Robin recognized as that of the herb-doctor. “I’m Dr. Dooley, fro’ Frog Fold. I’ll bring him round i’ twothry minutes. He’s nobbut ’stonished a bit.”

“For God’s sake do, if you con!” cried Doggy, earnestly. “Him and me wor olus good friends afore to-neet. He has a dacent wife and three little childer at home. It would break her heart, and I should have to run my country if he wor to dee.”

“Get out o’ th’ road,” said Dooley, pushing aside the people who were crowding round.

“Fot a can o’ watter, one on you, and a torf or two to put under his yed.”

Then, kneeling beside the wounded warrior, he whipped out a lancet, and dexterously cut a vein in Ratten’s arm, and a jet of warm red blood spurted into the face of the still blubbering Doggy.

“Didn’t I tell you so?” exclaimed the quack doctor, triumphantly. “He’s as weak as a snig. Now a sup o’ water on his face, and then two torfs under his yed.”

Ratten sighed and opened his eyes; then, shuddering, closed them.

“God help me!” he murmured. “Have I wakened up i’ hell?”

The question was natural. The lurid glare of the torches, the sooty visages of the colliers, the unwashed and generally ill-favoured countenances of the others, Dooley with his gory lancet, Doggy with his bloodstained and tear-bedewed face—all these made up a scene that might well affright the soul of the half-conscious rat-catcher, and lead him to believe, for a moment, that it was more of Hades than of earth.

“No, no, owd mon, thou art noan dead by a long way,” said Doggy, soothingly. “What made thee think thou wor i’ hell?”

“Because thou looks so much like a devil.”

This sally was naturally followed by a roar of laughter, and shortly afterwards Ratten, being raised up, was able to walk into the house.

The next proceeding was to reward Dr. Dooley. Doggy gave him sixpence—all the money he had not gambled away—and a brace of pheasants; and a collection was made which brought him two or three shillings more.

“I’m gradely set up. I haven’t had such a day this winter,” he said gleefully, as, lantern in hand, the “doctor” piloted Robin and the weaver through the fields. “Th’ pheasants—I shall sell ’em of course—th’ pheasants and this bit o’ brass will keep th’ pot boiling at our house till welly Christmas. You’ve browt me luck, and I shall not forget it. If ever you want a doctor, you know where I live. Dr. Dooley, Frog Fold. Here

you are! That's the road. Turn to your left and keep straight on, and you'll get to th' far end afore ten o'clock. Good-neet, and thank you."

"Good-neet," said Romford, taking the man's proffered hand. "But before we part, I'm going to ax you to do me a favour."

"Ax away—one good torn deserves another. I'm Dr. Dooley, fro' Frog Fold, and I've gotten a pair o' forceps i' my pocket, likewise a lancet."

"It's not that. I don't want bleeding just now, and I haven't an unsound tooth i' my yed. I'm feared there's mischief brewing, and I want yo' to find out who's at th' bottom on't."

"Mischief! What sort o' mischief?"

"Murder, fire-raising, and machinery-breaking."

"Owt else?"

"Well, happen some stealing and sich-like. There generally is when th' devil's let loose, and one thing's sure: it'll end in a good deal o' hanging, unless we can put a stopper on

it. Now, look here, Dr. Dooley! There's them at Red Nell's as knows all about it, and there's one mon there as is at th' bottom on it, and th' top too—unless I'm gradely ill mista'en. He carries a pistol in his pocket, and to th' best o' my belief, he doesn't belong to these parts. We heard 'em talking as we coom o'er th' moor; but we didn't see 'em, and they didn't see us. You're going to stop at Red Nell's aw neet, and if you keep your e'en and your ears oppen, you may leppen [light] o' summat as will giv' us a clue. If you do, it will be worth your while to let us know—either me or this young mon. My name's Romford—I'm middling weel known—and I live at Moor Cottage. His is Nelson, and he lives wi' Jim Rabbits, th' spinning mayster at Ruberry's factory. It will be worth your while, and you'll do a good thing at th' same time; 'cause if there's ony lumber, poor folks is sure to suffer, while them as eggs 'em on will, ten to one, get off scot free."

"That is gospel truth. Well, I'll do my

best. One good turn deserves another. If I hear owt, I'll let one on you know. Not as I've much against machinery-breaking. It's machinery, and sich-like, as is ruining th' country. But murder and fire-raising ! Them's the very devil. Ay, I'll let you know ; and if there's any tooth-drawing or blood-letting wanted, you'll not forget Dr. Dooley, fro' Frog Fold, as he's reckoned a handy chap with th' lancet and forceps. Good-neet to you once moor. We'se meet again."

"Come on, Nelson!" said Romford. "We've an hour's hard walking before us, them sheep trotters will be tired o' waiting, and I'm base hungry. Red Nell's oat-cake isn't filling, and her ale is summat like what Bob Wensley's wife brewed when hoo had no maut, and couldn't afford to buy hops."

CHAPTER III.

A CONFESSION.

WHILE Robin and the weaver were wandering over the moor, Colonel Dene sat in his room at Dene Hall. Several papers and a miniature lay before him on his desk, but his pen was idle, his head rested on one of his hands, and he seemed absorbed in thought—so absorbed that he heard neither the opening of the door nor the footsteps of his wife as she crossed the softly-carpeted floor.

“Pardon me for interrupting you,” she says, laying her hand gently on his shoulder, “but Walter (the head groom) says that he fears Willie’s pony is vicious; it kicked several times yesterday, and Walter has heard of a Shetland that would just suit the child. But I should like to have your opinion, so

I have told him to send one of the men for it, and when the creature comes—— What have you here?" (taking up the miniature which her husband was furtively pushing under a sheet of paper). "A young woman! Who—what? I never! Here is an inscription: 'Sophie, to her dear Will!' Sophie, to her dear Will! Ah, I remember! They used to call you Will at home. But who is Sophie? You never had a sister Sophie. Whose likeness is this, Eustace? I want to know."

Mrs. Dene's voice, as well as her manner, showed the emotions that were struggling in her mind—surprise, suspicion, incipient jealousy.

"I want to know," she repeated, seeing that her husband did not answer. "Did the young woman, of whom this is the likeness—did she give you this miniature?"

"She did. But it is long ago, and she is dead."

"She was very dear to you, I suppose?"

"She was," said Colonel Dene, with a troubled look.

“And you said nothing to me of this before! I deserved better of you, Eustace. I have never loved but you—never had a thought that you might not share. And yet you have secrets from me? Oh, Eustace, it is cruel!”

“You surely don’t think, Edith, that a man of the world reaches forty without having had affairs of the heart, and when once a man is married they are best buried in oblivion.”

“Ah! But is it buried in oblivion? If you had forgotten this woman, if you loved me half as well as I love you, I should not find you adoring her miniature years after her death. Are you sure she is dead?”

“Quite sure.”

“Oh, Eustace, this was no common affair of the heart! . . . Tell me, now, what was this girl to you—sweetheart or mistress?”

Colonel Dene rose from his chair, and took both his wife’s hands in his.

“Edith, I implore you,” he said, earnestly, “let this subject drop. It is better for your

peace of mind and mine, and for our mutual happiness, that it should. Like most men, I have had fancies and flirtations, but in all my life I have loved but two women. One is not ; the other, dearest, is yourself" (kissing her).

"Why, then, were you looking at—that woman's miniature?"

"You are surely not jealous of a miniature, my Edith? Well, I will tell you. It struck me that there was an extraordinary resemblance between—this face and Miriam Ruberry's. Don't you see it?"

"No; I cannot say that I do" (examining the miniature). "At any rate, it is very slight."

"That is because you never saw the original."

"Who was she, Eustace? Cannot you trust me? I must know! Talk about peace of mind! I shall not have a minute's peace until I do. What were your relations to her? You haven't answered me."

"Are you in earnest, Edith? Will you

not accept my assurance, and let the subject drop?"

"I cannot if I would. I should be able to think of nothing else. It is better for us both that you make a clean breast of it. I shall then believe what I should otherwise doubt—that you really love me; for love implies confidence, does it not?"

"Very well. I will, as you say, make a clean breast of it," returned the colonel, gravely. "And I confess now that it would have been better had I done so at the outset. But I acted, as I thought, for the best; and—don't you remember once saying that you would never marry a widower. The original of that portrait, Edith, was my wife."

"Your wife! Your wife! And yet you never told me. It was ill done, Eustace—it was ill done. What if I did say that I would never marry a widower! I would have married you had you been twice a widower. But this deception—oh, it is more than I can bear!" and Mrs. Dene fell a-weeping and

wringing her hands as if her heart would break.

“I admit it. I should have told you,” said Colonel Dene, looking deeply distressed. “I ask your forgiveness for not telling you; and when you know all, I think you will both pardon and pity me. Will you hear me?”

“Go on,” murmured the lady, with averted face.

“In 1798, when I was a subaltern in the Marines, I spent several months with my company at Port-of-Spain. It was there I met Sophie Mendoza. She was both beautiful and good, and I fell over head and ears in love with her; and though she had not a penny for her fortune, and I only an allowance of two hundred pounds a year from my father, we married. If Sophie had had a father or a mother we should probably have acted less rashly. But she lived with an old maiden aunt, who was too glad to get her niece off her hands to throw any obstacle in the way of her marriage. When the regiment went home Sophie accompanied us, and

before the ship reached Plymouth she became a mother."

"Oh, heavens! There was a child, then! But not a boy, Eustace—not a boy!"

"Yes, a boy. I know what you are thinking about. But the boy will never trouble you, Edith; he is with his mother, poor little man! We called him Rupert, for I did not want to give him a family name; but we always spoke of him as Robin. I did not tell my father of my marriage; he would have been wild with rage, and might have stopped my allowance. I took lodgings for Sophie and her child in a pretty village on the coast. I spared her one hundred and twenty pounds a year out of my allowance, on which, supplemented with an occasional lift from my prize money, she contrived to live—I hope not uncomfortably. Whenever I had opportunity—which, being nearly always on foreign service, was not often—I went to see her.

"And so the years wore on, until I was again ordered to the West Indies. Before my departure I spent a happy fortnight with

Sophie and Robin. . . . I have never seen them since. . . . After I had been on the station a twelvemonth I fell ill of a fever, and when I partially recovered, was invalided and sent home in an armed transport, bound for the Thames. The month before I left I wrote to Sophie to meet me in London. But 'Man proposes and God disposes.' When half way across the Bay of Biscay we were chased by a French frigate, double our size; and after a desperate engagement, in which I was severely wounded, we had to strike our flag. We were taken to Brest, and I was sent as a prisoner of war to a central prison in the interior of France. Months passed before I got better of my wound, and more than a year before I was exchanged. I will not attempt to describe the agony of that terrible time—agony of body and anguish of mind, for Sophie was entirely dependent on me. She had little more money than would maintain her for a few weeks in London, and I knew not what would become of her and the boy.

“When I was released I hurried to Lulworth. Nothing had been heard of her since her departure, but through the carrier, who had taken some of her luggage to London, I obtained the address of her lodgings. I went thither, of course, but only to learn that when her resources were exhausted she and her child were turned into the street.

“I spent a whole month in seeking a clue to their fate. I consulted the police, I went to everywhere, and at length I found Two days after she had been thrust by her heartless landlady into the streets, two bodies—the body of a woman and the body of a little boy—were taken out of the Thames, below London Bridge, and from the description given of them, there could be no doubt that they were those of my wife and her child. In a fit of desperation—homeless and hopeless—Sophie had taken her life and his. In any circumstances, so terrible a tragedy would have been sufficiently heartrending; but my grief for their untimely end was intensified by the pangs of remorse. Had I

openly avowed my marriage the catastrophe could not have happened, for my father and my friends, however much they might have blamed my imprudence, would at least have taken charge of the boy, and saved Sophie from suicide and despair. God alone knows how much I suffered, and I suffered in silence, for not even to my dearest friend did I reveal the cause of my sorrow. So soon as my health permitted, I exchanged into a line regiment, and joined the army in Spain, there, if possible, to find forgetfulness in death. But it was not to be. I seemed to bear a charmed life, and beyond one or two trifling wounds, I passed through every danger unscathed. Meanwhile time, the healer, was slowly blunting the sharpness of my grief. Five years afterwards I met you, and forgot my misfortune in the hope of a new happiness. Were I to say that I never think of Sophie, you would not believe me, yet you and Willie are all in all to me, Edith. My old love for her has served rather to intensify than diminish my love for you.

“Now that you know all, you may guess why, in addition to the other reasons I have mentioned, I desired to bury in my own heart the one secret of my life. But I did wrong. I should have told you all, even at the risk of giving you pain and losing your love. It was a weakness, just as it was a weakness to conceal my marriage with Sophie, for fear of offending my father and losing my allowance—a weakness and a mistake, one of those mistakes which in certain circumstances may have worse results than a crime. . . . I have freely confessed; can you as freely forgive me, Edith?”

For a few minutes Mrs. Dene was silent; but after a short, though, as her countenance showed, a fierce struggle, her good angel triumphed—for the time.

“Oh yes, Eustace; and, more than that, I pity you. How you must have suffered! You are right. Let this terrible episode of your life be buried in oblivion. I will not deny that I would rather have been your first love; but as my boy and I are all in all to

you, and there is nobody to come between us, and I have the best husband in the world, I am content. I might be jealous of the living; it were wicked to be jealous of the dead. And now no more of this; we will never mention it again. . . . Let us talk about something else. What was it? Oh, dear Willie and his pony. He must really have another."

"By all means, if you think so."

"And when this one comes that Walter has heard of you will look at it, and give me your opinion?"

"Of course I will. All the same, you cannot tell, merely by looking at it, whether a pony is quiet and safe. We must have it on trial for a day or two."

"A good idea. It would never do to have another kicker. I will let you know when it comes—the pony, I mean, not the idea. And now I will leave you to finish your correspondence."

"She might be jealous of the living, but it were wicked to be jealous of the dead,"

murmured Colonel Dene, when he was left to himself. “And yet I fear that deep down in her heart Edith is jealous of the dead ; for though she pitied me she had not a word of pity for Sophie and that poor boy. . . . I said, truly, I love Edith, but I shall never forget Sophie—never. My first love, so gentle and self-sacrificing : never a word of reproach for the seclusion in which I kept her. Even in her extremity she did not apply to my people, poor girl. And Robin ! I can still see him as I last saw him, when his weeping mother held him up to kiss his hand as the coach was driving away. Is he really dead ? There were discrepancies in that description, and unless Sophie had been really out of her mind she could not—no, she could not—have taken his life before taking her own. The suspicion has long haunted my mind, and especially since I met this Nelson, that he still lives. . . . The same age, and that white lock ! And there is something in the lad’s appearance and story that strangely attracts me. . . . But no ; it is impossible.

Robin knew who I was—my rank and name, and he was quite old enough and sharp enough to put somebody on the right track, if not to find me himself. Then the name! Yes, it is impossible—utterly impossible. If he lived he would have found me or I him long, long ago.”

CHAPTER IV.

PERPLEXITIES.

IN addition to his other perplexities, Robin had now to decide how he should communicate to his employers the particulars of his adventure on the moor, or so much thereof as it concerned them to know. It would not be expedient, he thought, to bring in the name of the Radical weaver; and after his promise to Red Nell to "keep a still tongue," he could not mention his visit to the hush shop, much less whom he had seen there; for if Robert Ruberry knew, or even suspected, that any of the hands frequented the place, they would be in his black books, and, in all probability, incur the pain of dismissal. It was not only that Red Nell's had an evil reputation; the hands were expected to do their drinking at "The Hare and Hounds,"

which well-accustomed inn was the property of the firm, and those of them who went elsewhere were sure to incur their masters' displeasure. For those reasons Robin limited his communication to the purport of the overheard conversation. As he expected, Old Bob tried to make light of the threats of his unknown enemies; but the angry look in his eyes, and the nervous twitching of his lips, showed that his indifference was more apparent than real.

"You did right to tell me, Nelson," he said coldly; "but I'm quite used to this sort of thing. I have heard of such-like language being used time out o' mind, and I'm here yet. You know the proverb—'Threatened men live long!'. . . These fellows had a pistol among 'em, you say?"

"Yes; they flashed it to get a light for their lantern."

"Was it loaded, do you think?"

"It must have been. They had to draw the charge before they could flash the powder."

"And you have no idea who they were?"

“Not the least.”

“But they were our hands?”

“Some of them were, at any rate. But whoever they were, I could not see them; it was pitch dark.”

“Why didn’t you follow ’em up?”

“I did as long as I could—until the light disappeared—and then I lost them.”

“How did you find your way home, then?”
(sharply).

“Went on till I came to a house, where I found a man who put me in the way.”

“What man?”

“He said his name was Dooley—Dr. Dooley; but he does not live hereabouts.”

“No; he lives at Frog Fold. I know him—quack doctor and scamp.”

“Scamp!”

“Radical, if you like it better. They’re both as one. But couldn’t you tell any of those fellows by their voices? There’s hardly a man’s voice on th’ ground as I don’t know.”

“But there are a good many that I don’t know.”

“That’s true. Well, I don’t think it matters much. There’s talk o’ that sort going on every day, and if they think to flay me, they’re infernally mistaken.”

Whereupon Robert Ruberry, as if he wanted to have done with the subject, began to open the letters which lay on the desk before him.

“Hello!” he exclaimed, tossing one of them to Robin. “Here’s summat else! Is it from that chap as wants to shoot me, do you think?”

It was a threatening letter of the sort so abundant in Ireland. Beneath a rude drawing of a coffin in black were pen-printed in red ink these words, which sprawled in a ghastly fashion all over the paper:

“OWD NICK TO OLD BOB.

“If thou doesn’t mind what thou art doin’, and give thy spinners a rise, thou’ll be a bludy corpse afore th’ month’s out.

“OWD NICK,

“His merk [a gridiron].”

“ Well, what think you ? ” repeated Robert Ruberry. “ Is it a joke, or is it earnest ? ”

“ A joke, I should say,” answered Robin, though he had his doubts.

“ How if it’s neither ? ”

“ It must be one or the other.”

“ I’m not so sure. The writer of that letter doesn’t mean to kill me—not he. When folks mean murder they don’t write letters beforehand. He wants to flay me, that’s all. But he has done me, the thief. He did not prepay th’ letter, and it has cost me thirteen-pence. I don’t think any of the spinners has done it—there’s none of ’em as can read or write, much less draw. But it has been done in their interest, and there’s them on this ground as knows all about it.”

“ Done in their interest ! I see. You are only to be killed if you don’t grant an advance of wages.”

“ That is it. Th’ hands want a rise. They say they are ill paid. It’s a lie ; they are well paid. They want a rise, but they, haven’t the courage to ask me ; so they get

some Radical scamp, like Romford or Dooley, to send me this letter. But they have got th' wrong sow by th' ear this time. They'll find as 'Owd Bob,' as they call me, isn't so easy flayed as they think."

"It may be so. Yet, taken in connection with the attempt to smash the engine, and what I heard on the moor, this letter has certainly an ugly look. Won't you take any precautions at all?"

"For myself, none. I'll not give in to 'em so far; while, as for th' factory, all I shall do will be to make th' overlookers keep a sharper look out, and do th' same myself. And—ay, I'll clap another five thousand on th' insurance; we are a bit under the mark at present. It's best to be on th' safe side—give ourselves the benefit of the doubt, you know—and if they do burn th' factory down, I'll build another twice as big while they're clemming. A brand-new concern is so much better than an old 'un that I've no doubt we should be gainers in the long run. Ay, let 'em burn it. I know who would suffer most."

After delivering himself of this tirade, Robert Ruberry, without waiting for a reply, resumed the reading of his letters, to two or three of which he proceeded to write answers, handing them, as they were finished, to Robin to copy and address.

While they were thus occupied, the tramping of naked feet and a sound as of hushed voices were heard outside, followed, the next moment, by a knock at the door.

“What the deuce!” exclaimed Robert Ruberry. “Come in!”

On which the door opened, and disclosed a crowd of spinners, behind whom were gathered several scores of piecers, card-room hands—male and female—and others.

Old Bob could not have looked more surprised if his visitors had been Red Indians in their war-paint, or Chinamen with tails.

“Well,” he said, turning round and glaring at the intruders as they trooped into the counting-house, “this caps all! I never knew owt like this! What’s up? What do you want?”

"Thee speyk, Bill." — "Not I: speyk thyssel." — "Let Jim o' Jacks speyk." — "No, Pe o' Bobs; he can talk," whispered the spinners, as they pushed each other forward; but none seemed desirous to take the post of honour.

"What! Dare none of you open your mouths?" sneered Old Bob. "Come, out with it! You are the oldest spinner on the ground, Pluckett. What does this mean?"

Thus appealed to, Pluckett, a middle-aged, broad-set man, with iron-gray hair and a care-worn face, stepped to the front.

"We want a rise of ten per cent. aw raand," he said.

"Ay, ten per cent. aw raand," chorused the others, whose tongues were now loosened.

"Ten per cent. ! Hadn't you better ask for a hundred per cent. while you are about it? Would you like me to give you th' factory, and all as I have besides, and spend th' rest of my days in th' poor-house."

"We haven't a living," quoth a man in the crowd. "I work like a hoss fro' Monday

morning to Saturday neet, and I durned addle enough to keep th' childer i' porridge."

"More fool you for having childer. I did not ask you to have any, did I? I've no childer."

"It is a good job for th' childer as you haven't. You'd clem 'em to death!" cried a rough yet distinctly feminine voice.

"Who—who said that?" demanded Robert Ruberry, now almost beside himself.

"I did," answered a big card-room lass, thrusting her way through the throng. "I said it, and you may bag me if you like. I can nobbut go to th' poor-house, and I'se be better off theer than i' one of your cottages. They're no better than dog-kennels. You wouldn't put your hosses i' sich-like hoyles."

"Come, no more of this! Now, I'll tell you what, chaps. You want a rise of ten per cent. Well, I'll not give you one per cent., not while your hearts beat, and if you don't get back to your work without any more bother, by—— Oh, you'll not flay me. Stand back, I say."

Several of the foremost spinners, stung by their master's contemptuous language, made as if they would strike him ; but Robert Ruberry stood his ground, and though Robin's sympathies were entirely with the hands, he could not help admiring the old man's courage, for a single blow from a spinner's horny fist would well-nigh have annihilated him. He more than stood his ground ; he dominated them.

“Get back to your work, I say,” he repeated, stamping his foot on the floor, and quivering with passion. “And if you are not gone in two minutes, by G—— I'll stop the factory for a month, and them may find porridge for their childer as can. Turn out, will you ? Well, do it, then. But let me tell you one thing : if you stop out till th' day o' judgment, you'll not beat me. Back to your work this minute !”

And they went. First the women and card-room hands, sullenly and silently ; then the spinners, muttering threats of vengeance.

“You see ! It is as I told you,” said

Robert Ruberry, as the last of them withdrew. "Th' letter was written in the interest of the hands. I begin to think it was written by one of 'em, and sent to Manchester to be posted. Have you learned anybody to write besides Jim Rabbits?"

"No."

"Well, take care you don't. What business have workfolks with writing? Let me see—didn't I hear summat about Blincoe having learned to write while he was in prison?"

"Yes. I believe he had learned once before—a good many years since, and when he was in prison somebody gave him a copy-book, and with a bit of practice it came back to him. At any rate, that is what he told me."

"Can it be him, do you think?"

"Why should he write such a letter? He is still an apprentice, and it can make no earthly difference to him whether wages are raised or not."

"That's true. All th' same, some of th' others may have made a spoon-handle of him."

I have a good mind to ask him——But it would be no use, he'd lie; they all lie. And now, Nelson, not a word of this—the letter I mean—to anybody, not even to my brother. I don't want it to be buzzed all o'er th' place, and Ben never could keep a secret in his life. Hello! Somebody at th' door. They are surely not coming back?"

Here the door opened a second time, and Miriam, with a pale and agitated face, entered the room.

"Oh, uncle," she cried, "what has happened? The yard is full of people, and they are saying such terrible things, cursing you and my father, and saying that you want to starve them to death."

"They were surely not rude to you, Miss Ruberry!" interposed Robin, with some heat. "If they were——"

"Not in the least. They made way for me, and one woman said, 'God bless you!' and something else" (blushing).

"What! Haven't they gone to their work, then?"

“I think so. They seemed to be going. But what is it all about, uncle? What has happened?”

“They have had th’ impudence to ask for a rise of ten per cent.—nowt else—and I told them plump and plain that they shouldn’t have it while their hearts beat.”

“But some of them are so very poor. I called just now to see Trimble’s wife. She is ill in bed, her children are only half clad, and for a whole week they have had nothing to eat but porridge without milk—and not enough of that. If you could give them some advance—if not ten per cent., then five—it would be a great help and a great kindness.”

“Not it! They’d spend it all in drink, and want another rise next year. Besides, it cannot be afforded. There’s nobody I would sooner oblige than you, Miriam, but the concern must not suffer to please anybody, and to yield to insolent demands like this would be just ruination. You can see yourself that the more we do for them the more

ungrateful they are, and the worse to manage. Haven't we built that cottage hospital as you wanted, given th' 'prentices better food and more liberty, and made most of th' cottages weather-tight—and what's the return we get? A demand for a ten per cent. rise! And one of th' card-room lasses had th' impudence to say as our cottages are no better than dog-kennels."

"Some of them are worse, uncle. When I saw Colonel Dene's kennels the other day, I wished that our cottages were half as comfortable."

"Colonel Dene! Do you think we can cope with a man as has ten thousand a year, paid every six months? Besides, it would never do to make th' cottages too comfortable; th' hands would be stopping in 'em all day long instead of coming to their work. And this is a free country. Them as doesn't like 'em can leave 'em. Isn't your father coming down?"

"Not this morning. He wanted me to tell you that he has gone, at Colonel Dene's

invitation, to have a day's shooting in the home coverts."

"Well, I dare say we can do without him. I'm going into th' factory to see if those fools have set to work again. Shall I see you across th' yard?"

"Thank you, uncle. If you have done with that book I last lent you, Nelson, I shall be glad if you will let me have it back," said Miriam, in a matter-of-fact way, but with a reproachful glance at Robin, which her uncle, who seldom missed anything, perceived and wondered greatly what it could mean.

"Certainly," he returned. "I will send it to-morrow, or the next day—or bring it myself."

"Thank you. That will do very well. Good morning."

Robin was at no loss to understand the meaning of Miriam's reproachful glance. Though several days had elapsed since his interview with Romford, he had not, as yet, informed her what the former advised, or what he himself proposed to do; for how

could he tell her of the appalling idea which the weaver had suggested—that his father and mother were possibly—nay, probably—not man and wife? As yet, moreover, he had not decided whether he would act on his Mentor's advice. At one time he would say to himself that the mere suggestion of so hideous a possibility was dishonouring to both his parents. At another time he would reluctantly admit the possibility, with the qualification that, if it were so, his mother must have been deceived, and his father be a villain of the deepest dye, to whom he owed neither affection nor duty. And he had a haunting fear that it was so. He could not deny, even to himself, that the circumstances of the case seemed to square with Romford's theory, yet he thought that his present suspense would be easier to bear than confirmation of so terrible a suspicion.

On the other hand, he had a strong desire to know the truth, and it was obvious that if he refrained from revealing himself to Colonel Dene, Miriam, and in all probability Romford

likewise, might set him down as an impostor and his story as a fiction.

In the end, and after much perturbation of mind, he resolved to let Miriam decide for him. Seeing that he knew beforehand what she would say, this was not a very logical conclusion ; but he was not in a logical frame of mind, and it pleased him to think that he was making her the arbitress of his fate. So he wrote her a short note, which, bearing in mind the possibility of its being intercepted, he so expressed that it could not easily be understood by anybody else :

My friend thinks that C.D. is my father, and advises me to speak to him. If you are of the same opinion, I will take the earliest possible opportunity of doing so.

ROBIN.

He put the missive inside the book (a copy of *Mansfield Park*), which, after folding in brown paper, he took to Oaken Cleugh. He would have liked to see Miriam, but hearing that she was with her father and uncle, and

fearing that if he asked for her it might excite suspicion, he merely requested Phœbe to give the packet to her mistress.

On the day following he received his answer (enclosed in a copy of *Belinda*). It ran thus :

I am of the same opinion as your friend. By all means act on his advice, and let me hear from you again as soon as may be.

MIRIAM.

CHAPTER V.

FATHER AND SON.

THE die was cast then, and albeit Robin could not shake off his misgivings, his mind was made up. He would know the truth, be the result what it might, if only to satisfy Miriam; and he felt in his heart that, though she did not know all the facts, her advice was sound. The sooner he acted on it and saw Colonel Dene the better, and as the only times when Robin was not at work until eight or nine p.m. were Saturdays (when the engine stopped at four) and Sundays, it must be one of these days. He elected for the former, and on the first Saturday afternoon following the receipt of Miriam's letter set out for Dene Hall, taking with him the

copy of *The Bride of Lammermoor* to return, which was the ostensible object of his visit.

He lingered long on the way, thinking how he should broach the subject; but as none of the plans which he formed seemed satisfactory, he finally resolved to trust to the chapter of accidents and the inspiration of the moment. When he knocked at the door, shortly before six, he was so agitated that he could hardly command his voice, and it was with a sense of relief rather than of disappointment that he heard Colonel Dene was not at home. His master and mistress were out at a dinner-party, said the footman. Would Mr. Nelson leave his card? Mr. Nelson had no card, but he left a message and the book.

"Tell Colonel Dene," he said, "that Mr. Nelson has a communication to make, and will call again to-morrow afternoon."

Then he returned to his lodgings, and spent the rest of the evening in giving Jim Rabbits a lesson in arithmetic, and though Robin did not take very kindly to the occupation,

it was so far useful that it served to divert for a while the current of his thoughts. But night brought a renewal of his cares; his fitful slumbers were haunted by hideous dreams, and he awoke so weary and unrefreshed that instead of going to church, as usual, he took a long walk in the fields. The ramble and the respite did him good—calmed his mind and restored his courage; and albeit, when he knocked for the second time at the door of his father's house, his heart beat faster, he could inquire without any show of nervousness whether Colonel Dene was at home.

“Yes, sir,” said the man, respectfully; “he is in the library, and will be glad to see you. Will you step this way?”

Robin followed his conductor, and was duly announced.

Colonel Dene, who had been reading, rose from his chair and gave his guest a cordial greeting.

“I am glad to see you,” he said; “it is good of you to come again so soon. Sorry I was out when you called yesterday. You

brought back *The Bride of Lammermoor*. What do you think of it?"

Robin answered something, he hardly knew what. He was struggling with tumultuous thoughts, and trying to still the almost audible throbbings of his heart, for now that the supreme moment of his life drew near, his old apprehensions revived in full force.

"Won't you sit down? Or perhaps you would like to select another book? The latest editions are on the shelves next the window," said Colonel Dene, thinking thereby to give the young fellow (whose agitation he attributed to shyness) an opportunity of recovering his composure.

"Thank you," answered Robin, as he acted on the hint. But he had no sooner reached the window than he wheeled suddenly round, and returning to the Colonel, looked him full in the face.

"Colonel Dene," he said in a broken voice, "I have not come for a book. I have come to ask you a question."

"To ask me a question! What is it,

Nelson?" answered the Colonel, kindly, but with a look which expressed something more than surprise.

"I think, sir, you can tell me something about my father. I . . . I have not seen him for more than twelve years. You called me Nelson just now. My name is not Nelson; it is Ravensmere—Rupert Ravensmere."

Colonel Dene turned deadly pale, and rising a second time from his chair, placed his hands on Robin's shoulders and devoured him with his eyes.

"If your name be in truth Rupert Ravensmere," he said slowly, and articulating with difficulty—"if you are in truth Rupert Ravensmere, you are my boy, my long-lost boy. But if you are deceiving me, by Heaven—— The truth, the truth!"

"I am in very truth Rupert Ravensmere, Colonel Dene. My mother's maiden name was Sophie Mendoza. I was born on board the troopship *Agricola*, during a voyage from Port-of-Spain to Plymouth, and the last time I saw my father was on the day he left us

at Lulworth, where we were living, on his appointment to a command on the *Vesta*, bound for the West Indies. We stayed at Lulworth until he wrote to my mother from Martinique, saying that he had been wrecked, and was coming home, and that we were to meet him in London——”

The inspiration of the moment was serving Robin well. He was recalling without effort names and events to which for long years he had been oblivious.

“And then?” said Colonel Dene, eagerly, whose white face, damp with sweat, and trembling lips showed the intensity of his emotion. “And then—you went to London?”

“Yes, we went to London, and my father did not come, and we fell into want——”

“You fell into want, and—and—— But your mother, boy—tell me about your mother! Did she suffer much? Were you—were you with her to the last?”

“I saw her die.”

“Poor Robin! Poor Sophie! And she so good and brave! The horror of it!—oh, my

God, the horror of it! . . . She must indeed have been maddened by want to abandon her child and take her own life!"

"Take her own life! My mother take her own life and abandon me! I don't understand. You are quite wrong."

"How? Did not the poor creature drown herself? Her body was found in the Thames."

"Oh no, sir; my mother did not drown herself."

"What then, boy—what then?" asked Colonel Dene, in a barely audible voice; for the fearful thought had crossed his mind that Sophie might still be living.

"My mother died in the dock of the Old Bailey, sir."

"No, no, no! That would be worse—worse than starvation—worse than suicide! My wife—the wife of a Ravensmere—die in the dock of the Old Bailey! Oh, my Sophie—my wife!"

His wife! The words conjured away all Robin's mistrust, and his heart went out to his father.

“Oh no, I cannot, will not, believe it,” murmured Colonel Dene. “Say you are deceiving me, boy, and I will forgive you.”

“It is only too true, my father—— May I call you father?”

“May you call me father! Ah, Robin, you little know how dearly I loved you, how I sought after and sorrowed for my lost darling and her child, and though she is not, you are restored to me . . . My little Rupert, how well I remember him! And now he is as tall as myself. Come nearer. Let me put my arms round you, and look more closely at your face—my eyes are dim with tears . . . Ah, yes, you are altered, greatly altered; but it is Robin’s face still. Blind, blind that I did not see it before! And there is that white lock your mother told me about in her letters. When we first met I liked you, and you interested me. And, strangely enough, I had more than once a vague suspicion that you might be my boy. But when I calmly reviewed the facts, I laughed at myself for entertaining so preposterous an idea, and

dismissed it from my mind. How could a factory apprentice called Nelson, even though he had a white lock and was of the same age, be the child who I had reason to believe had been dead for years? Even now it seems impossible, and if my heart did not acknowledge—— But your mother—how did it come to pass? She was surely not a prisoner? Died in the dock of the Old Bailey! Tell me all, boy. Sit here, near me, and tell me all quickly, from the time we parted at Lulworth.”

Again, and, as he wrongly thought, for the last time, Rupert Ravensmere told his strange eventful history.

For a while Colonel Dene listened in silence; but when he heard of all that his wife and son suffered in London he became greatly excited, interrupting Robin with frequent exclamations and questions, such as:

“——Did ever anybody hear of so noble a woman? She knew where my people were, and even though they might have blamed me, they would have helped her for my sake.

And yet, rather than make known my secret, she endured all this ignominy and want! And you and she were turned into the cold streets, my poor boy, and I——! But go on——what next? Quick——what next?”

“——And that wretched Jew actually gave her into custody when she would have returned the cloak! Where is he, that I may crush the breath from his vile body? Go on, go on!”

When Robin told of his mother's imprisonment and trial, and of the last scene of all, the Colonel bowed his head and wept, and his son wept with him. Then indignation gained the mastery. He rose from his chair, and gesticulating wildly, protested that he would seek out the judge—Hardress—and denounce him as the murderer of the best woman who ever lived.

As Robin went on, the Colonel calmed down somewhat, and his questions and interruptions became fewer and more coherent.

“You were quite right, Robin,” he observed, “when you said Mr. Bartlett was your second

father; he did more to deserve your love than ever I did. Would it were in my power to thank him for his kindness to my desolate boy! Do you know what I thought when you told me about him, and of your treatment by Moses Weevil? I thought you were Bartlett's son, and had been cheated out of your inheritance. It was that idea, as much as anything, which threw me off the right scent. I still think the scoundrel had some strong motive for getting rid of you. So you were persuaded to become a factory apprentice—of all things in the world!”

For several minutes after Robin had told his story Colonel Dene remained silent, and, as it seemed, lost in deep and painful thought.

“Rupert Ravensmere,” he said, at length, looking tenderly at his son—“Rupert Ravensmere, do you know that you are the heir to Birch Dene?”

“That is as you like, sir.”

“Not at all. The estate is settled on me and my first-born son and his son after him. You are my first-born, and therefore the heir.

And you shall be acknowledged as the heir, Robin ; but not just yet. Are you in a hurry to assume the position, or will you wait a while—to please me ? ”

“ I will wait, father, as long as you wish. ”

“ Spoken like your mother’s son, dear boy ! ” said the Colonel, warmly. “ And yet I have no right to demand of you so great a sacrifice. Rather do I owe you reparation for the wrong I did you—you and her. ”

“ Wrong ! Oh no, there was no wrong. If you had not fallen into the hands of the French on your voyage home, all would have been well. ”

“ If ! But I had no right to count on all going well. In not providing for the contingency, which I ought to have foreseen, and which actually occurred, I failed in my duty. And it could have been done so easily—a letter to my father, to be forwarded to him by your mother in the event of my death or capture by the enemy. He would have been highly incensed, I dare say, but he would have done his duty. And I ought to have avowed

my marriage from the beginning. I tried to persuade myself that if I did so I should lose my allowance; but it was much more fear of incurring my father's displeasure and giving pain to my family. Fear of giving pain to those I cared for was rather a weakness of mine in those days . . . Yes, Robin, I owe you reparation, yet I am going to ask you to make a great sacrifice . . . When I openly acknowledge you, one of the first persons to be informed must necessarily be Mrs. Dene—I can hardly bring myself, as yet, to speak of her as your stepmother—I ought really to tell her before I tell anybody else; and as she is in a delicate state of health just now, I fear the shock would be more than she could bear. She has always looked upon Willy as the heir, and her disappointment, when she knows the truth, will be great——”

“Let Willy be your heir, sir,” broke in Robin; “I ask no more than to be your son.”

“A very noble offer, my dear boy, for which

I thank you with all my heart. It is more than I deserve. But you cannot help being the heir. I am only the life-tenant. If you survive me, Birch Dene must one day be yours. All I ask of you is that you wait a few months until Mrs. Dene is so far recovered that I may tell her, without risk of serious consequences, that the son whom I thought dead is still alive."

"Do you call that a great sacrifice, father? Why, it is nothing at all! Of course I will wait, as long as you like."

"And remain at the factory?"

"And remain at the factory."

"Keeping the name by which you are known there, and not mentioning to a soul either who you are or what has passed between us to-day?"

Robin's countenance fell. If he told Miriam and Romford naught of what had passed between his father and himself, they must needs discredit his story, and look upon him as an impostor.

"Have you told anybody who you are?"

“I told Romford, the Radical weaver, who I thought I was, and asked his advice—in the strictest confidence.”

“So you think he is a man who can keep a secret, then?”

“I am sure he is.”

“Romford is in evil odour with my brother justices. All the same, I have heard a good report of him, and I believe he is an honest man. I will see him, and I have no doubt he can be prevailed upon to keep his own counsel. Have you told anybody else?”

“Yes, sir, I told all I knew about myself to two persons—one of whom was Romford, the other Miriam Ruberry.”

“Miriam Ruberry! Also in confidence, I suppose? How came you to tell her, Robin?”

Robin explained that he and Miriam had struck up a sort of platonic friendship, that he told her his story before he had any idea that Colonel Dene was his father, that it was from her he learnt that the Colonel's original name was Ravensmere, and by her advice that he had consulted the weaver.

“Can she also keep a secret, do you think?”

“She has given me her word, and what Miriam promises, that will she do. She is as true as steel.”

“Do you love her, boy?”

“Do I love Miriam?” answered Robin, turning very red, and looking very self-conscious. “Yes, sir—as a sister—nothing more.”

“Of course, nothing more,” answered the Colonel, gravely, albeit the suspicion of a smile hovered about his lips. “I understand—a purely platonic friendship! But you need not blush, Robin. To love a sweet girl like Miriam would be no reproach——”

“I assure you, sir, I never thought——” broke in Robin, impetuously.

“——Would be no reproach to any young fellow,” continued the Colonel, quietly. “Rather the contrary. It would be a reproach if you did not love her—more than platonically. Not that I suppose you have seriously entertained the idea of making her your wife. You are just a little young for

that yet. But the experiences you have undergone have developed your character, and made you older than your years. I was not very much older than you are when I fell in love with your mother. However, this is not to the purpose ; for though I am your father, you need not make me your father confessor—unless you like. Be Miriam to you what she may, I want you to keep our relationship even from her, for the present.”

“But what must I do ? What shall I say ? What will she think of me ?” demanded the young fellow, passionately. “She knew I was going to see you. She strongly advised me to see you, and if I refuse to tell her what I have heard she must think ill of me. She will either think that I have no confidence in her, or that my story is untrue. And she would keep it a profound secret, even from her father and her uncle. I am sure she would.”

“So am I ; and I am equally sure she would not think ill of you or ascribe your reticence to any want of confidence in herself.

Listen, Robin : as I have already explained, I am most anxious that Mrs. Dene should not know you are my son for some time to come, and that she should hear of it from nobody but myself. Now, if you were to tell Miriam, you would place her in a false position. Whenever she came here—and I hope she will come often—she would have to play a part, and be continually on her guard—might even inadvertently betray her secret; for Mrs. Dene is a woman of the world, quick at reading character and drawing conclusions. It is better, even for Miriam's sake, that she should remain for a while in ignorance. And if she has a regard for you—— Has she ?”

“I—I think so——”

“If she has a regard for you—a sisterly affection, let us say—she will give you credit for sincerity, and be content to wait until such time as you can tell her all—and it will not be very long. Tell her so—tell her that your lips are sealed, and ask her to trust you, and keep to herself so much of your story as

she already knows. If she be the girl I take her for, she will not hesitate."

"Very well, sir, if you think so——"

"I do think so, and you will greatly oblige me."

"If you put it in that way I cannot hesitate. I will not tell even Miriam that you are my father."

"You are very good. I should not have been at all surprised if you had refused. I thank Heaven that you are what you are, and not what you might have been. The trials which would have utterly marred a less sterling nature have made yours all the stronger. I can be proud of Sophie's child—I am proud of him. And don't fear; your probation will not be for long; and it shall be made as tolerable as possible. I will speak to Mr. Ruberry; I will ask him to show you all the consideration in his power. I think I can do it in such a way as will not excite his suspicion."

"You had better speak to Mr. Robert, sir. He is the virtual master of the concern, and his brother's keeper."

"Mr. Robert let it be, then. But I shall have to mind my P's and Q's. He is very sharp and keen, that old man. And now, my dear boy, how are you off for money?"

"Oh, I have some laid by, and they give me five shillings a week."

"Five shillings a week! And how much have you laid by?"

"Nearly five pounds, sir."

"Nearly five pounds!"—(smiling). "Well, how much shall I allow you? You have a claim, mind. You are my heir, and by good right should be at college or in the army, and at my charge. Instead of that, you are keeping yourself, and I consider myself to be heavily in your debt. How much shall we say?"

"I would rather leave it to you, sir; and really I can make shift very well with what I have."

"And I would rather leave it to you. Come now—how much?"

"Well, if I must say, I think"—(hesitating)—"I think ten shillings a week would be quite ample."

“Oh no, Robin; I cannot allow you ten shillings a week.”

“I am very sorry. Five shillings, then.”

“I did not mean that ten shillings was too much. You must have a hundred a year at least; and next year, when you are of age, I shall make it a thousand.”

“A thousand a year!” exclaimed Robin, with a bewildered look. “What shall I do with it?”

“When you take your right position as heir to Birch Dene, you will not find a thousand a year too much. We may look upon that as settled, then. Is there anything else? Yes, I must take down the address of that Mr. Chubb . . . ‘Mortimer Chubb, Lincoln’s Inn Fields,’ I think you said. I shall not write to him. I will see him when I go to town, and if I can arrange it you shall go with me, so that we may visit together your poor mother’s grave. . . We were talking just now about Miss Ruberry. Has it ever struck you that she is like anybody?”

“Yes, she is like my mother.”

“ You saw it, then ! Yes, they are strangely alike. When I first saw Miriam she quite startled me. But the resemblance must be accidental. There can be no relationship. And she seems to be a good girl, and of a sweet disposition.”

“ Except my mother, I have never known anybody so lovable and good.”

“ And you love her ? ”

Robin made no answer, but the flush on his face and the light in his eye showed Colonel Dene that he had guessed aright.

CHAPTER VI.

OLD BETTY TALKS NONSENSE.

ROBIN'S predominant feeling, as he wended homeward, may be best described as elation, dashed by doubt. He had found his father—a father who was all he could desire—who realized his ideal of an officer and a gentleman, whom he could unreservedly respect and love with all his heart. He was heir to Birch Dene and ten thousand a year; and though it hardly seemed possible that it could ever be his—for Colonel Dene looked as if he might live to be a hundred, and Robin hoped he would—the position was a splendid one, and surpassed his wildest expectations. He, the London waif, rescued from the streets by the kindness of a tradesman—then workhouse apprentice and Lancashire factory boy—now the son of a

distinguished officer of ancient lineage, and heir to one of the finest properties in the county! It seemed like a dream. Fortune had, indeed, been very kind to him. What more could he wish?

Nevertheless Robin was not content. He was forbidden to tell Miriam these glad tidings of great joy. He must tell her nothing of what had passed between his father and himself—and he longed to tell her all. She, his sweet counsellor, having shared in his anxiety, it was natural that she should desire to share in his triumph. And he loved her. Since his father had opened his eyes he knew that he loved her with a more than fraternal affection—more passionately than he had once loved his mother, and more devotedly than he now loved his father. He could, moreover, indulge in hopes and visions that only a few hours ago would have seemed the merest madness or the sheerest impudence. Mr. Ruberry was not the man to refuse his daughter to the heir of Birch Dene; and who but his father had detected the true

character of his love and fanned his smouldering passion into a flame ?

Yet, until that same father unsealed his lips, he must remain silent, and bury in his heart both the fact of his love and the secret of his birth. For the two went together. Rupert Ravensmere Dene might, without presumption, woo Miriam Ruberry ; but if Robin Nelson, factory apprentice, dared to speak of love to his master's daughter, he would richly merit the scornful repulse which he was sure to receive. Unless Miriam loved him as he loved her—— But no ; it was too much to hope for. Such an idea, he felt sure, had never entered her mind ; she was too modest, too unsophisticated, too religious—for the young fellow ascribed to his sweetheart every perfection under heaven, and several more. Then, again, he would have to keep from her what she was eager to know, repay her confidence with seeming distrust, and so, as he feared (his father to the contrary notwithstanding), lose her friendship and incur her displeasure.

“ Altogether a very hard case ! ” he exclaimed aloud.

“ What is a very hard case, Nelson ? ”

“ God bless me !—you here, Romford ? ” exclaimed Robin, as the weaver, who had overtaken him unperceived, laid his hand on the young man’s shoulder. “ I was thinking aloud.”

“ So it seems ; and a dangerous habit it is—unless you want folks to know your thoughts. What is a hard case ? ”

“ Something I was thinking about.”

“ That means something as you don’t want to tell. Well, I’ll ax you no questions, and then you’ll happen tell me no lies. Wheer have yo’ bin ? ”

“ Isn’t that a question ? ”

“ It’s nowt else. However——”

“ Oh, I have no objection in the world to say where I have been. I have been to the Hall.”

“ And have yo’ seen th’ Colonel ? ”

“ I have.”

“ And how have yo’ gone on ? ”

“I am not at liberty to say.”

“Not at liberty to say!”

“No. I have given my word not to reveal to anybody what has passed to-day between my—between Colonel Dene and myself. But he will see you himself, and then perhaps——”

“See me himself! The deuce he will! That’s a queer tale. Mon I go to him, or he’ll come to me?”

“That I cannot tell you; but I think it is very likely you will hear from him, either to-day or to-morrow.”

“Well, I dare say I can wait that long; and as you willn’t tell me owt, there’s no use saying no more about it. However, I’m fain I’ve letten on yo’, for if you’ve nowt to tell me I’ve summat to tell yo’. I’ve seen Dr. Dooley. He came to our house this afternoon, and I’ve just been setting him on his way home.”

“He has heard something, then?”

“He has. He yerd summat that neet at Red Nell’s, and he has yerd summat sin’. It confirms my worst fears. There’s mischief

brewing, Nelson. 'The ringleader is a man called Simon Peter."

"Simon Peter! But that cannot be his name."

"Onyhow, it's th' name as he goes by, and that's enough for our purpose. I believe it's him wi' th' pistol as talked about shooting Robert Ruberry. He has gotten up a secret society, him and a lot more, and most of th' hand-wheel spinners and calico weavers in these parts and many a mile round is in it. They think as burning a few factories would do 'em a power o' good, and flay th' Government into granting reform, repealing th' corn laws, and what not; and they have some wild ideas about marching to London in their thousands, and overawing Parliament! They might as well try to overawe Holcombe Hill. However, what most concerns us is as they mean to begin wi' Ruberry's factory. But when, is more than Dr. Dooley knows or I can tell you. It may be next week—it mayn't be for a month or two. Now, what are we to do? I dare say Government knows all about

it; they have Blackfaces—that's to say spies—everywhere. But they don't believe in prevention being better than cure. Their plan is to let things get to a head, and then make an example—which means shooting and sabreing a lot o' poor, misguided, starving rioters, and then hanging and transporting th' ringleaders, or them as they choose to consider ringleaders. This we must prevent—if we can. But I'll be dashed if I know how! You see, I'm a marked man. If I was to speak to th' head constable at Manchester, he'd want to know where I got my information, and as I could not tell him—for it would never do to get Dooley into a hobble—he'd ten to one lock me up there and then; for now the Habeas Corpus Act is suspended, he can do what he likes. And the magistrates hereabouts are just so many Justice Shallows—they dare not call their souls their own. Besides, they would not give me a hearing—while as for Bob Ruberry, you know what he is."

"Why not speak to Colonel Dene?" said

Robin, stopping short in the path. "Why not speak to Colonel Dene? He, at least, dare call his soul his own, and he will know what should be done, if anybody does. And he wants to see you. It is not late; go to the Hall at once, and tell him what you have told me."

"Well, there's summat i' that. But do you think he'll see me?"

"Of course he will. Haven't I said that he wants to see you?"

"I wasn't thinking of him; I wor thinking o' them chaps wi' pigtails and big coaves. They look as if they could be mighty saucy to a poor mon, and I'm not quite clad in purple and fine linen," observed the weaver, casting a glance at his corduroy breeches and iron clogs.

"Never mind that. Send in your name, and say you want to see Colonel Dene on particular business, and he is sure to receive you. I don't think the footman will be saucy. If he is——"

"I'll larn him manners."

“How will you do that?”

“I’ll punch his shins for him. Well, it isn’t a bad idea, take it altogether. Onyhow, I’ll try it on, and to-morrow neet I’ll slip into Jim Rabbits’ and tell you how I have fared. You willn’t be flitting to Dene Hall afore then, I reckon?”

The heir to Birch Dene was so taken aback by this home thrust that he could only say, very confusedly, he had no immediate intention of changing his present quarters.

“The deuce you haven’t!” said the weaver, with a knowing laugh. “Well, I must be off. Good-neet to yo’, Mr. Ravensmere. I’m not such a foo’ as I cannot put two and two together.”

“I have not mystified Romford much, at any rate,” thought Robin, as he resumed his walk. “He has evidently about guessed the truth, and what he does not know my father will have to tell him—probably intends to tell him. Will Miriam put two and two together in the same way, I wonder? I don’t quite see why my father is so anxious to keep

her in the dark. It is not as if she knew nothing. She knows my name is Ravensmere, and that the facts of the case point to the probability of Colonel Dene being my father, while his continued kindness will be a sufficient proof that my account of myself is not a fiction. However, I have promised, and I must keep my word."

Very correct reasoning, no doubt; but it did not occur to Robin that his father was perhaps not quite as morally courageous as he was physically brave, and that in addition to the other reason he had assigned for wanting to keep his wife in the dark, Colonel Dene was in no hurry to make a revelation which, besides being painful to both of them, would almost certainly cause an unpleasant scene, and might not improbably imperil their domestic peace.

There are some men so constituted that they would rather charge a battery single-handed, or lead a forlorn hope, than face an aggrieved woman; and it was quite certain that when Mrs. Dene learnt that her darling

son had an elder brother the Colonel would have to pass a very bad quarter of an hour.

Robin was too much busied with his own difficulties to give much thought either to the analysis of his father's motives or the doings of the secret society which, according to Dr. Dooley, was plotting the destruction of Ruberry's factory. How to inform Miriam that he had nothing to tell her was the great question which occupied his mind, almost to the exclusion of everything else. By letter! The idea was conceived only to be dismissed. The risk would be too great (at least, he so persuaded himself), and in a letter, let it be as long as it might, he could not possibly say all he wanted to say. It would be far better to see her, and it perhaps counted for something that he wanted very much to see her. But when and where they were to meet, and how the interview (which must necessarily be a secret one) was to be arranged, was not quite apparent.

In the end, Robin decided (and perhaps wisely) to leave this difficulty to be dealt with

by Miriam. He would just write that he had something to say which could only be communicated in a private interview, and ask her to give him a rendezvous.

So the next morning he indited a short note in this sense, which he enclosed as usual, in a book ; but instead of taking it to Oaken Cleugh (and perhaps having to entrust it to Phoebe, who was as quick at drawing conclusions as Mrs. Dene), he confided the packet to Betty, with a request to give it into Miss Ruberry's own hands the first time she called at the apprentice house, which he expected would be on the following day ; and by way of ensuring due attention to his instructions, he tipped the old woman a shilling.

Betty, who could put two and two together as well as most folks, gave Robin a stare of surprise ; then, taking her pipe from her mouth, she spat on the coin with great deliberation.

“ That's for luck, and much happiness to both on yo'," she said, with an expressive wink. “ Ay, I'll give it to her reyt enough, and say nowt to nobody. Yo're a gradely lad,

and a good plucked 'un ; but I never thowt as yo'd have th' corridge to buckle up to Miriam."

"You are quite mistaken, Betty," stammered Robin, turning very red. "It is only a book I am returning to Miss Ruberry."

"Nobbut a book ! Why durn't yo' send it back by Owd Ben or Owd Bob then, or one o' th' carters ?—and why is it done up so tidy i' papper and twine ?—and what have yo' gan me a shilling for ? Yo' never gav' me one afoor. But never fear, I'se say nowt to nobody, and I'se keep this shilling, and sup it when yo're wed."

"You are talking nonsense, Betty," exclaimed Robin, turning redder than ever—"utter nonsense ; and if you say anything of the sort to Miss Ruberry, I—I'll never trust you or speak to you again."

"Do you think I've no more sense ? I'm owd, I know, but I'm not silly. I'se not let on to nobody, no more than if I wor dead."

CHAPTER VII.

LOVE AND WAR.

A DAY or two afterwards, Robin, sauntering into the apprentice house at a time when Betty had finished "siding up," found her sitting by the fireside, solacing herself with a pipe.

"It's aw reet; I gav' it her," she said, without waiting to be asked.

"You said nothing, I hope—nothing absurd, I mean?"

"Not a word. I gav' her th' book, and just winked—that wor aw."

"You what?" exclaimed Robin, aghast.

"I winked. Nowt wrong i' winking, I hope? And hoo gav' me a shilling, too"—(chuckling).

"I'se have hoaf a crown, within sixpence, to

sup when th' time comes. Bithmon, there'll be fine doings!"

"Did Miss Ruberry say anything?" demanded the young fellow, severely, as if he desired to put a stop to Betty's rather impertinent loquacity.

"Nobbut 'Thank you, Betty. This is from Nelson, I suppose?' Hoo thinks some weel on yo', hoo does that."

"Don't talk nonsense, Betty, I beg of you . . . Hem! What makes you think so?"

"I could tell by the glint of her een and th' blush on her cheeks when I gav' her th' book. Yo've nobbut to go in and win. I know what lasses is. I wor a lass once mysel'—and reckoned a bonnie 'un too; though to look at me now yo' happen wouldn't think so."

Not being able to discern in the old woman's wrinkled and not very clean face any traces of former beauty, and desiring to close the conversation, Robin merely observed that age made a great difference.

"It does that," said Betty, with a hoarse

gurgles, which she probably meant for a sigh. "It takes th' gloss off everybody, let 'em be as bonnie as they like; and th' time will come, if hoo lives, when Miriam 'll be th' marrow o' me."

The idea of Miriam éver being like old Betty was quite too much for Robin, and with a muttered excuse about having work to do, he returned to the factory.

More than a week passed before he received his answer, and he was beginning to fear that he had so offended Miriam by asking for an interview that she would have nothing more to say to him, when one day, as he passed the door, Betty beckoned him in.

"Hoo left this for you, an hour sin'," she said, giving him a small brown paper parcel. "Put it i' your pocket and get you gone. Dick may be back ony minute."

Robin, nothing loth, put the parcel in his pocket and went. The parcel, of course, contained a book, and equally, of course, the book contained a letter. The letter ran thus :

“Dear Robin,—I am quite at a loss to imagine what should hinder you from telling me by letter how you went on at the Hall—or at least whether the Colonel is your father or not. So long as you don’t come up to the house, nobody can suspect anything. No, I won’t see you alone. My father would not like it, if he knew; and I don’t think it would be right. You must put it all in a letter. If you do not, I won’t be your sister any longer.—Your sincere well-wisher,

“M. R.

“P.S.—My father has to be at the rent-dinner at Toppleton on Tuesday night, and if my uncle goes to Liverpool on that day, as I think he will, you may come up after the factory stops. But don’t come to the front door; come to the French window of my sitting-room—you know where it is—opposite the weeping ash—and rap gently on the glass. But if nobody answers, you must go away at once, for I am not at all sure that I shall let you in. Only that I am so anxious, for your sake, to know how you went on at the Hall, I would not see you in my father’s absence for the world. Please burn this letter immediately.”

With which request, it is scarcely necessary to say, Robin did not think fit to comply. After reading and re-reading the missive several times, he put it carefully in his pocket, with the intention of adding it to the hoard of similar treasures which he kept in his box at Jim Rabbits'. Nevertheless, he found the letter rather disappointing, and decidedly embarrassing. Miriam acceded to his request for an interview solely for the purpose of gratifying her curiosity, not in the least because she had any regard for him. And when she knew that all he had to say was that he could tell her nothing, what then? Would she not—and with good reason—be very angry, bid him begone, and refuse to have aught more to do with him? Much as he wanted to see her, he began to doubt whether he had done well to ask for an interview, without hinting that his lips were sealed as to what had passed between Colonel Dene and himself.

So it came to pass that Robin went to the rendezvous with very mingled feelings, and in anything but a confident frame of mind,

fearing much and hoping little, and not knowing what on earth he should say. All the same, he had his wits about him, and took every possible care to avoid observation, going by the fields instead of up the avenue, and entering the garden by a side gate. On reaching the weeping ash he paused, listening intently, and peering into the darkness. When he had made sure that the coast was clear, he crept stealthily to the French window, which was overhung with greenery, and knocked softly at one of the panes.

No answer ; and though Robin listened his best, he could hear no movement within, and, the shutters being up, he could see nothing.

After waiting a few minutes he knocked again. Still no answer. A third trial proved equally ineffectual, and he was going sorrowful away, when a gleam of light fell on the path. Turning again, he saw that the window was slightly ajar.

“ Miriam ! ” he whispered, eagerly.

“ Yes, Robin ! I—I think you may safely come in ; but only for a minute, mind ! Quick,

lest somebody should see the light!" And with that she opened the window (without showing herself) just wide enough to admit him, and, when he was inside, shut and bolted it.

For a few seconds neither spoke a word, and it would have been hard to say which of them seemed the more embarrassed. Robin felt almost tongue-tied, and after one timid glance, Miriam, deeply blushing, lowered her eyes before his.

"I am so glad you opened the window," said Robin at length. "I thought you were not within, and was just going away."

"I heard your first knock—but I was afraid—my father does not want—I mean, he is away, and I don't think it is right—but it is only for this once, and you must not stay many minutes. Why couldn't you write? Is Colonel Dene your father—or were you mistaken?"

"I am very sorry," stammered Robin. "I am very sorry, but I cannot tell you, Miriam. I have given my word not to tell anybody—

for the present. But it will not be for long. As soon as I am at liberty to speak, you shall be the first to know everything."

"Oh, Robin, why this concealment? Can you not trust me?"

"Trust you!" exclaimed Robin, wildly. "I could trust you with anything of my own—with my very life! But this secret is not my own. I have pledged myself not to reveal it for the present, even to you."

"And you have come to tell me this!" said Miriam, who had now quite regained her composure.

"Yes, I have come to tell you this. I wanted to see you, because I could not explain myself in a letter. Speaking is so different from writing. I feared you might misjudge me, and fail to understand my motives for this concealment, which is more painful to me than it can be to you; for I would like to tell you so much, Miriam."

"Why don't you, then?"

"Because I have given my word not to. You would not have me break my word, Miriam?"

“But I don’t understand. It would be so simple to say whether Colonel Dene is your father.”

“So it would—if I had not pledged myself to Colonel Dene to keep it secret.”

“To keep what secret?”

“What he told me, and who my father is,” replied Robin, in some confusion—for he had only just missed letting the cat out of the bag.

“He is not your father, then?”

“I cannot say. If I were to answer your question, I should break my word.”

“He is your father, then?”

No answer.

“Will you tell me, at least, one thing? Are you Robin Nelson or Rupert Ravensmere?”

“I am under no pledge on that score,” returned Robin, after a momentary hesitation. “Besides, I have already told you my name, and what I told you was true.”

“In that case Colonel Dene is either your father or you are the son of some relative of his?”

Again Robin remained silent.

“Why don’t you answer?”

“Because I cannot. I have no more to say.”

“You had better go, then. Indeed, I don’t know why you came—unless it was that you raised my expectation merely to have the pleasure of witnessing my disappointment. Yes, go, and don’t trouble me any more.”

“If you talk in that way, Miriam, you will drive me wild,” said Robin, turning pale. “You are unkind and unjust. If you cared for me, you would trust me.”

“If you cared for me, you would trust me.”

“If I cared for you! You little know. Listen, Miriam, and I will prove that I do care for you. As I said just now, I have promised not to impart this secret to anybody. If I break the promise, which, thinking of you, I gave very reluctantly—if I break this promise I shall both lose my own self-respect and incur and deserve the displeasure of a man whom I honour and esteem above all other men. But if you say to me

now, 'Robin, break your word for my sake, and tell me all,' I will do it."

"You are a good, brave boy, Robin. You said just now I did not care for you. Well, I care for you too much to let you do wrong for anybody's sake. I will wait."

"Oh, Miriam, you have made me so happy!" and, without thinking what he was doing, he clasped the girl in his arms.

"How dare you, Robin! Let me go this instant!" she exclaimed, as by a sudden movement she freed herself from his embrace. "If I had thought—oh, this is too bad! Why did you do it, Robin?—why did you do it?"

"Because I could not help it," responded the youth, now too excited to be regardful either of prudence or propriety. "Because I could not help it, and because I love you with a love that is past telling. You are more to me than all the world, Miriam."

"This language to me!" said the girl, drawing herself up and looking really angry. "How dare you? You are taking a mean

advantage of my kindness. I could not have thought it of you, Robin. Go!"

"Not until you have forgiven me for my presumption. Yes, I was mad. But how can I help loving you, Miriam? When I came here, a poor apprentice, fatherless, motherless, and nameless, without a friend in the world, who took pity on me, who became my friend, saved me from despair, and filled my heart with courage and hope—who but you?"

"And this is my reward! Go, I say!"

But she said it gently, almost imploringly; her manner had lost all its asperity, as her face had lost all its anger.

"Not until you have forgiven me."

"Yes, I forgive you. But it is more than you deserve. Do go, please."

"And you love me just a little—don't you, Miriam? Not as I love you, but just a little?"—taking both her hands in his.

"How can you ask me? Will you go?"

"When you have answered me."

"Just a little," she murmured, raising for a moment her tear-filled eyes to his.

“Heaven bless you, Miriam!” exclaimed Robin, now wild with delight. “Words cannot tell how much, how dearly I love you.”

“If you love me you will go.”

“One kiss, then—only one.”

“Oh, Robin, you are cruel! How can you? It—it would not be seemly. What would my father say?”

“Only one!”

This time Miriam made no answer, and Robin, taking silence for consent, gave her only one; but it was well given, and then Miriam, putting her arms round his neck, hid her burning face in his breast.

The next moment she pushed him away, murmuring:

“Oh, what have I said, what have I done? If you love me as you say, you will go at once. Suppose Phoebe were to come in, or my father or my uncle were to return!”

As she spoke she unbolted the window. Robin would have lingered a little longer, but seeing that she was really distressed, he silently kissed her hand and went into the

darkness; but the light of love in his heart made the night seem more glorious than day.

Miriam held the door ajar until she heard the last of his retreating footsteps, and then, closing it softly, she threw herself into a chair, and covering her face with her hands, burst into tears.

“I am a wicked girl,” she murmured. “I am a bad, wicked girl. What would my Aunt Branscombe say? How soon have I forgotten her wise counsel, her lessons on seemliness of conduct and modesty of behaviour, on keeping a watch over my impulses, and turning a deaf ear to the blandishments of young men! And I promised that if ever I did marry, my husband should be a man of piety and experience, several years my senior, to whom I could look up for guidance and support, and who would lead me in the paths of godliness . . . And I have allowed my heart to go out to a youth only a little older than myself, and told him that I loved him, and let him kiss me! But

he would not go, and I could not help it, and I love him. I do—I do . . . Yet surely it cannot be wrong, for Robin is good and true and brave; and my Aunt Branscōmbe said nothing was more sinful than to marry for money or position, and Robin has neither. . . Ah! I never thought of that before. If he be heir to Birch Dene—and I am almost sure he is—the Colonel might refuse his consent, for the Denes are an old county family—and, if he is not, my father would be very angry. God help us both, for if I were to lose him I think I should die. . . But I do not think my father would be hard, and Robin is true. How nobly he refused to break his promise, though I teased and tempted him! Dear Robin!”

Miriam’s reverie lasted for the greater part of an hour, and would probably have lasted longer, had it not been interrupted, first of all by the sound of voices in the hall, and again, a few minutes later, by Phoebe, who, entering the room hurriedly and in a state of great excitement, informed her that “Mr.

Robbut" had returned, and she had better come at once—"something had happened."

"Where is he?" asked Miriam, rising from her chair.

"They have just gone into the breakfast-room."

Thither Miriam straightway went, wondering who "they" could be. In the breakfast-room she found her uncle, Gib Riding, and—Robin! All were in a state of great disarray. Her uncle's hat was crushed out of shape, his cloak covered with mud. Robin's head was bleeding, he had lost his cravat, his coat was rent, and his waistcoat buttonless. Gib had no hat at all, one of his eyes was nearly closed, and his stockings were cut and stained with blood.

"Oh, uncle, what is the matter? What has happened?" exclaimed Miriam, aghast.

"Nowt much, as it has turned out," said Robert Ruberry, confusedly. "A bit of a scrimmage, that's all. But if it hadn't been for Robin and Gib here, I should either have been killed or beaten within an inch of my

life. I was walking home from th' Four Lane Ends, where I got off th' coach."

"Walking home! Why didn't you take a chaise?"

"A chaise would ha' cost half a crown, and as th' night was fine I thought I'd walk. Well, I'd got within a mile of th' factory gates, when three chaps came up to me. I knew not where from; they seemed to spring out of th' ground, they came that sudden. One of 'em said, as we were going th' same road we might as well go together. I said 'Ay,' if they liked. A bit after he asked if I wasn't Robert Ruberry. 'What is it to you who I am?' I answered, for I didn't like their ways. Then another said he knew devilish well I was Robert Ruberry, and they all set agate upbraiding me—called me an old tyrant, and I don't know what beside, and said as they were going to give me a damned good hiding. One of 'em—him as spoke first—threatened to kill me, and throw my carcass into th' dyke bottom. Then they began to hustle me about, so I just planted

my back against th' wall, shouted for help, and gave one of th' scoundrels a clinker o'er th' toppin wi' my stick, and defended myself as I best could. In another minute they would have been on th' top of me, but just then Nelson came up running, followed by Gib, and knocked one of 'em down. After that I can hardly tell you what happened. For two or three minutes it was a regular up and down; but we bested 'em, the villains."

"Ay, we did that," put in Gib, gleefully; "and if they hadn't cut off so sharp we'd ha' cotched 'em. I crashed th' biggest on 'em down, and punched his ribs till they fair cracked; and Robin fought like a gamecock—one down, t'other come on. 'They've gotten soor bones, whoever they are."

'I wish I knew who they are. Not any of our hands, I think."

"I am sure they are not," said Robin.

"But you may be sure of one thing: it was our hands as set 'em on—because I refused to give in to 'em, I reckon. Well, they'll get

nowt by it. They shall not have a penny of a rise—not if I dee for it.”

“Are you hurt, uncle?” asked Miriam, rather coldly, for his vindictiveness shocked her.

“Nowt to speak on. Got knocked about a bit—that’s all. When I have had a wash I shall be all right. Gib, you can go into th’ kitchen, and have a mug of warm ale, with a dash of rum in it, if you like.”

“If I like!” said Gib, smacking his lips. “Hot ale and rum! I’ll have a black ee ony time at th’ same price. A good feyt and hot ale and rum! It’s th’ best do as I’ve had for mony a day. Good-neet to yo’ aw.”

“Nelson has come th’ worst off,” continued Old Bob. “That is rather a nasty knock he has got on his head. See to him, Miriam, while I go up-stairs. I’ll be back in two or three minutes; and if he likes he can stop and have supper with us.”

Miriam told Phœbe to bring a basin of hot water and a sponge, and herself fetched a roll of plaster.

“Oh, Robin, it was quite providential!”

she said, as she tenderly bathed his wound. "How did it happen? Where were you?"

"Well, soon after I got into the road I fell in with Gib, and we were going on together, when we heard a cry of 'Help! Murder!' and running to the spot, found your uncle struggling with three men."

"And you saved his life, and he is very grateful. I can see it by his manner, though he does not say much. So am I. How I wish he would be a little more lenient with the hands! If he does not, I fear worse will befall. You must tell me if I hurt you, Robin. Oh, it is a terrible gash!"

"Hurt me! It is just the contrary. I would not mind having such a gash every day—if you might dress it for me."

"But I should mind it very much. Think how disfigured you would be! Now for the plaster."

When the plastering was done, Robin asked if he might have another, only one; and albeit Miriam blushed and averted her head, she did not say him nay.

When he was going away after supper, and rather a long time after, Robert Ruberry said, as they shook hands:

“You have done me a good turn to-night, Nelson. I shall not forget it.”

And Miriam, who chanced to be near the door as he went out, whispered:

“God bless you, Robin!”

CHAPTER VIII.

A PRESSING INVITATION.

MEANWHILE Romford had made his promised call at Jim Rabbits'.

"You were right, Nelson," he said. "I got to see Colonel Dene without much ado, though one o' th' chaps—him as wears a black coat and looks like a gentleman—would ha' sent me away if I'd ha' let him. Ay, he's a kindly mon. If I had been a cock-fighting squire, wi' a balance at my banker's, he couldn't ha' been civiller. He gav' me some supper, and we had a long talk."

"Did he say anything about me?"

"A good deal, and I think—— However, that's neither here nor there. A wise head keeps a still tongue. You've nobbut to be patient a bit, and you'll get your reyts, Rupert

Ravensmere. There's no fairer-minded mon i' these parts than Colonel Dene. He has sense, too; he isn't a goamless tupyed, like most country justices. When I towld him what we had yerd and what we feared, he grasped the subject at once, and decided there and then on the measures to be taken to prevent further trouble."

"What are they?"

"Well, Colonel Dene is very strong on the necessity of maintaining order. He does not approve of the Government policy of suspending the Habeas Corpus Act, suppressing reform meetings, and locking folks up without trial; and though he isn't a Jacobin, he thinks as there are many wrongs which cry loudly for redress. All th' same, he holds that the very worst thing as poor folks can do, even in their own interest, is to resort to violence, and the best way of preventing owt o' th' sort is to make it plain beforehand that the means are at hand to put it down. But that isn't all; if it wor, I'd have nowt to do wi' it, for order as is produced by repression and kept up by

fear is good for nowt. Colonel Dene proposes three things. He'll go to Manchester, and try to persuade the borough-reeve and t'other magistrates, or whoever it may concern, to quarter either a company of infantry or a troop of horse-sowdgers at Birch Dene. He thinks that would put a stopper on any idea of setting th' factory o' fire. So do I. Simon Peter will think twice afore he leads a rook o' spinners and weyvers ageean red-coats, wi' that owd pistol of his. Gad! I am not quite sure as that fellow isn't a Blackface, after all. That's number one. Number two is to hold a meeting, not to petition for reform—that might not be allowed—but to devise means for the relief of the prevailing distress, or summat o' that sort. Colonel Dene will be th' chairman, and start a subscription for the purpose in question. I shall back him up, and exhort folks to be patient and orderly, so will one or two other Radical working men as doesn't believe the cause of reform will be promoted by rioting and fire-raising. Number three is to try and prevail on Robert Ruberry

to be a bit easier with his hands, and give 'em a rise—if not of ten per cent., then five; for some on 'em is most fearful ill off."

"A very good plan, it seems to me. What, think you, are the chances of success?"

"Well, the Colonel is a man of influence and energy, and I should have no fear of his success but for one thing."

"And that is?"

"Stupidity. You have no idea what a lot of stupidity there is in th' world. I heard a sermon t'other Sunday on the mysteries of creation. The biggest mystery as there is, to my thinking, is why God created so many foo's. I'd liefer have a knave than a foo' ony day. A knave is sometimes reformed, but bray a foo' in a mortar and he's a foo' all th' same."

"You speak bitterly, Romford."

"Because I feel deeply. However, what think you?"

"Well, I have no doubt Colonel Dene will get his soldiers, and I dare say his meeting will prove a success; but I shall be very

much surprised if he persuades Robert Ruberry to give an advance."

"Ay, there's another of your mysteries of creation!"

"Come now, Romford, you surely don't mean to say Robert Ruberry is a fool?"

"But I do. A man as sticks to a thing for everlasting just because he has said it once, and is that bent on getting his own ends in his own way as he will hearken neither to justice nor reason, is a foo', and nowt but a foo'."

"All the same, I don't think Robert Ruberry is unteachable. It may require a severe lesson, but he will learn in the end."

"I'll believe it when I see it, Nelson. Anyhow, it's a fine thing to have a gentleman in th' neighbourhood like Colonel Dene, as has a bit of sympathy for poor folk, and is willing to put his hand in his pocket, and, what's more, giv' himself a lot of trouble to help 'em. Whether he succeeds or fails, such an example can hardly miss doing good. However, it is time for me to be going.

Will you be coming our way soon, think you?"

"Very likely. I'll take an early opportunity."

"Ay, do, and we'll have a long camp. And I've summat for you."

"What is it?"

"You'll see when you come. But there's no hurry. It willn't be wanted just yet, I reckon—never, I hope."

And with that the weaver went his way.

A few days later Colonel Dene called at Factory Hollow and saw Robert Ruberry, who received his distinguished visitor with great deference; for though Old Bob sometimes laughed at his brother's tuft-hunting propensities, he was by no means a democrat, and held rank and station (especially when they were accompanied by wealth) in high respect.

The Colonel opened the conversation with an inquiry about Nelson.

"Well, I've no fault to find with him," said Robert, cautiously. "He's sharp and

diligent, and makes himself useful. In fact, between you and me, I consider him a very promising young fellow."

"I am glad to hear it; for I thought well of him from the first, and I have now reason to believe that he is not what he seems."

"Not what he seems! How so?"

"I think he comes of decent people."

"Decent people!"

"Well, the expression is rather vague, I admit. I should rather say people of position."

"People of position! You surely don't mean to say as he is owt akin to Lord Nelson?" asked Robert Ruberry, now beginning to be deeply interested.

"Not that I am aware of, nor do I think so," said Colonel Dene, smiling. "Indeed, I rather doubt whether Nelson is his true name."

"The deuce! What is it, then?"

"Well, perhaps I shall be able to tell you later on. I am making inquiries. My idea is that Nelson has been robbed of his inherit-

ance, and sent down here to keep him out of the way."

"You think there is money coming to him, then?"

"Very likely. But for the present this is little more than surmise. However, I have got the address of a lawyer in London who, from what I hear, is much more conversant with the facts than anybody else, and when I go thither, as I shortly expect to do, I shall make a point of seeing him."

"How did you get to know all this, Colonel Dene?"

"I am not at liberty to say for the present; and really I know very little as yet. I am only just at the threshold of the inquiry, so to speak, and you will greatly oblige me by not mentioning anything of this, either to Nelson himself, or anybody else. It might give rise to expectations—you understand?"

"Perfectly. It might give rise to false hopes. Oh, I'll say nowt to nobody, not I. I'm not a random talker—I never was. Is it a good deal?"

“ Well, I rather think it is a considerable sum. But, mind, that is only my opinion.”

“ So much a year ? ”

“ Yes ; so much a year.”

“ Well, there always was something rather mysterious about that lad. He is an uncommon sort of apprentice, there’s no doubt about that. I remember being once a good deal struck by a remark he made. Miriam was saying something about Newgate, and he said as he had been there.”

“ In Newgate ! ”

“ Ay, in Newgate. He said he had gone as a visitor. But I know I thought it very queer that a child like him—he must have been very young—that a lad like him should go as a visitor to Newgate.”

“ I am sure it could not be in any other character.”

“ Well, then, he must have been taken to see a prisoner. Could it be anybody akin to him as had got into trouble, do you think ? If you could find that out when you go to London, it might happen furnish you with a clue.”

“So it might. I am obliged for the suggestion. I will make a note of it. And now, seeing what Nelson’s prospects may be, I should be glad—would take it as a personal favour, in fact—if you would show him all the consideration in your power.”

“Well, it does make a difference, doesn’t it? But really, Colonel Dene, I don’t see what more we can do. He gets five shillings a week and his board and lodging, and he’s doing useful work—useful for himself, I mean. He’ll be qualified for a manager’s place in another year or two.”

“I was not meaning that at all. I am sure you do your best for him, and as for money—— But your hours are rather long—they don’t leave much leisure for reading, and so forth; and if you could let him off an hour or two earlier occasionally, and allow him to come up to the Hall sometimes——”

“I’ll do that with pleasure. I’ll let him off whenever he likes, either to go up to th’ Hall or owt else. I consider myself a good deal beholden to Nelson, one way and another,

and if he comes into this fortune I shall be right well pleased."

"Thank you, Mr. Robert. And now I have another favour to ask of you, which I trust you will be able to grant."

Whereupon Colonel Dene, as delicately as he could (for he knew that he was treading on dangerous ground), spoke of the badness of the times, the prevailing distress, and the possibility of disturbances, concluding with a hint that it might be worth the Ruberrys' while, as a preventive measure, to grant their workpeople a reasonable addition to their pay. But as he went on he could see by the hardening of Robert Ruberry's face that he was foredoomed to failure.

"You mean kindly, I am sure," said Old Bob; "but you forget that the hardness of the times hits us as hard as anybody else. A rise of five per cent.—and if we gave owt at all, we should have to give that—a rise of five per cent. would cost us a matter of a thousand a year. And them as says our hands are ill paid says what isn't true. At

any rate, we keep 'em going, and that's what many a firm doesn't do. And I think you will agree with me as when a man has been in business as long as I have, he should be the best judge of his own interests."

After this there was nothing more to be said. Colonel Dene could only make his bow and retire.

"What a hard, keen old fellow he is!" was his thought as he went away. "I hope I did not say too much about Robin. His inference about the visit to Newgate was rather startling. I should be sorry for the fact of Sophie's imprisonment and its terrible sequel to get bruited abroad, either now or later. I must put Robin on his guard. But I don't think Ruberry will ask him any questions. He is too discreet, and he would know that I should hear of it."

Contrary to his expectations, Colonel Dene was no more successful with the authorities at Manchester than he had been with Robert Ruberry. They were sceptical as to the existence of a plot for burning factories, and when they found that he could not or would not

give the names of his informants, hinted that he had been "humbugged." Sending troops to Birch Dene was quite out of the question; they could neither be spared nor the cost afforded. But if there should be any rioting, and the local magistrates were to make a formal requisition for a military force, it would no doubt be placed at their disposal.

"The mischief would be done then," urged the Colonel. "My object is to prevent rioting, and I am persuaded that the presence of a few red-coats at Birch Dene would have the desired effect."

"You are quite mistaken, Colonel Dene. There'll be no rioting—not there," said the chief constable, with a complacent smile. "And as for burning factories down, they daren't do it. They know too well what th' consequence would be. There's a good deal of political discontent and underhand sedition, I admit, and we are taking our measures accordingly—putting down reform meetings and arresting Jacobin ringleaders. I have my eye on two or three in your neighbourhood.

However, as long as they keep quiet, and I've no complaints, they'll happen be let alone."

"Who are they?"

"Nay, nay, it would never do to let the cat out o' th' bag," said the constable, with a deprecatory shake of the head and a sphinx-like smile; for he had a strong suspicion that the object of his visitor, whom he regarded as a potential, if not an actual Jacobin, was to put the enemy on their guard.

So it came to pass that Colonel Dene had to content himself with carrying out only one article of his programme—the holding of a meeting to "devise measures for relieving the prevailing distress." So far as numbers and enthusiasm were concerned, the meeting was a success. The Colonel presided, made a moderate, strictly non-political speech, announced his intention of getting up a relief fund, and himself started it with a subscription of a hundred pounds. Romford, who followed him, was not equally prudent. True, he deprecated violence, avowed his disbelief in heroic remedies, counselled strict observance

of the law, and obedience to all constituted authorities ; but this was no sooner said than he observed that the authorities in question were mostly either fools or knaves, likened them to one of the plagues of Egypt, and expressed a hope that when the people "got their rights," they would send to Parliament men with "heads on their shoulders and hearts in their bosoms."

This sentiment was greeted with vociferous applause ; yet, everything considered, it would perhaps have been as well had the weaver kept away, for his presence on the platform so scandalized a number of respectable people that they neither attended the meeting nor loosened their purse-strings, and Colonel Dene had the honour of being almost the sole subscriber to the fund which he had called into existence. On the other hand, he became straightway the most popular person in the neighbourhood ; his praises were sung far and wide, and his generosity was contrasted with the stinginess of some other folks.

To Romford the consequences were less

satisfactory. On the Saturday night after the meeting he received a visit from the chief constable, who, after sarcastically observing that he had come to see whether the weaver had "a head on his shoulders," invited him in the king's name to step into a postchaise which was waiting at the door, under the escort of half a dozen dragoons.

Romford, who had a high spirit and a ready wit, laughingly answered that he could not possibly refuse so pressing an invitation; and after a few words with his wife—whom, as well as little Susie, he tenderly embraced—he let himself be handcuffed to one of the chief constable's men, and, getting into the carriage, was driven in the direction of Manchester; but as to his ultimate destination his captors could give no information.

Robin heard of this portentous incident within an hour of its occurrence, and went forthwith to see Mrs. Romford. He found the poor woman in great trouble.

"They've ta'en him, Mr. Nelson," she said, weeping—"they've ta'en him away fro' me.

They wouldn't give us five minutes together, and hardly let me have time to get him a twothry things to tak' wi' him. Never a better husband lee by a woman's side, and nobody can say as he worn't upright and honourable in all his dealings. Wheer have they ta'en him to?—wheer have they ta'en him to? Shall we ever see him ageean, thinkin' yo? Susie, poor little lass, is welly heart-broken. I've put her to bed, but hoo keeps moaning in her sleep, and crying, 'Daddy, daddy!' Oh, what mon I do?—what mon I do?"

Robin tried to comfort her by saying that, as her husband had broken no law, he would probably be released after a very short detention, and in the meantime he would see that she did not want for anything.

"I worn't thinking o' that," she said, drying her tears. "I can fend for mysel' and Susie while he's away, and if you think it willn't be long, I'll try to be patient. It'll be easier for me than for him, locked up in a cowl dungeon neet and day, wi' barred windows

and an iron door, and belike not enough to eat. He gav' me aw th' bit o' brass as he had in his pocket, except a shilling, and he wouldn't ha' kept that if I hadn't made him. He sent his respects to you, Mr. Nelson, and said as he'd write to you as soon as he geet a chance. Do you think as they'll let him write? It would be sich a comfort to get a line fro' him now and then."

Robin told Mrs. Romford, much to her satisfaction, that he felt sure her husband would both be allowed to write to her and get enough to eat, and on the following morning he went to Dene Hall, and informed his father of Romford's arrest.

Colonel Dene was both grieved and indignant.

"I am very sorry," he said—"the more especially as it is in a great measure my doing. I should not have let him speak at the meeting."

"Do you think it is that which has caused his arrest?"

"I am sure of it. Some busybody, or

perhaps a spy, has reported his remarks to the chief constable. It is a most foolish proceeding, for his arrest, besides removing a distinctly moderating influence, will, I fear, greatly exasperate the people, and make things worse instead of better. Romford was quite right—though not very wise—in saying that our rulers are mostly either fools or knaves. I shall go to Manchester to-morrow, and try to find out where they have put him, and how long his imprisonment is likely to last. Tell his wife, Robin, that I will allow her a pound a week during his absence, and that, beyond his imprisonment, I do not think he will take much harm—State prisoners being always treated with much more indulgence than ordinary criminals.”

CHAPTER IX.

THE LONG STRIKE.

“HAVE you heard the news?” asked Robert Ruberry of Rupert Ravensmere when they met at the factory the next morning.

“Of Romford’s arrest, you mean?”

“Ay, they fetched him on Saturday night. I thought I’d take the shine out of that fellow.”

“It is your doing, then!”

“Partly what, I think!” said old Bob, complacently. “I just let the head constable know what Romford had been saying—as the government and parliament is composed of men who are mostly either knaves or fools—and if that is not sedition I’d like to know what is.”

“All the same, Mr. Robert, I think you

have made a mistake. Romford always discountenanced extreme measures, and advocated submission to the law and loyalty to the throne."

"He said so, I dare say; but he meant t'other thing; everybody knows that. Any way, his talk made the hands discontented, and I'm right glad they have lagged him; and unless I'm wrongly informed they'll be lagging some more of 'em before long."

Robert Ruberry was not wrongly informed. Romford's arrest was followed by half a dozen other arrests, and as many more (including Dr. Dooley) only escaped a like fate by precipitate flight. Nevertheless these energetic measures, though they caused no little consternation, and put an end to public meetings and "open and advised speaking," served but to increase the influence of the physical force party and of the secret societies, whose projects, now that one of his informants was in gaol and the other no one knew where, Robin had no means of ascertaining. For a while, however, all went on as usual; the hands, albeit

sullen and suffering, made no sign, and Robert Ruberry was more than confirmed in his policy of thorough.

“Didn’t I tell you so?” he said, with the self-satisfied air of a successful man. “Did not I tell you so? Some folks wanted me to give in to ’em. But I knew better. There’s only one way with the working-classes—stand up to ’em and keep ’em low. If I had given in to our hands they would have been the masters; and set a beggar on horseback and you know where he goes to. But they are beaten and they know it. We shall have no more bother, you’ll see.”

Robin himself began to be of the same opinion, and if Old Bob had not forgotten the proverb about the last straw his boast might have been justified and his prediction fulfilled. But in his anxiety to cheapen production (business being really very bad) he went to Liverpool and bought a lot of cheap cotton, which worked so badly that those of the hands who were paid by results, that is to say, the great majority of them, could not earn half

the wage which they usually earned and had a right to expect, let them work as hard as they might.

When Saturday came, and the people found how little money they had to draw, a deputation of spinners was appointed to wait on Robert Ruberry and ask that they might be paid by the day until the bad cotton was used up.

His answer was short and to the point.

“No, I’ll not pay you by the day. The cotton would last for ever if I did. The work is as good as you are likely to have it for a month or more. If you don’t like it you can leave it.”

They left it. On the Monday morning not one of the outside hands “answered the bell,” and as the factory could not be carried on with the apprentices alone, the engines had to be stopped and the gates closed.

And then, in his anger, Robert Ruberry did a very unwise thing—took out summonses against all the adult spinners for leaving their work without notice, an offence for which the

penalty at that time and for many years afterwards was a term of imprisonment. But the spinners retained for their defence a very acute lawyer, who contended that, by saying that if they did not like their work they could leave it, the managing partner had given them the alternative of dispensing with the usual notice ; and, further, that there was an implied contract for the firm to provide such material as would enable their hands to earn the average rate of wages to which they had been accustomed. This was so obvious that, notwithstanding their evident desire to convict the defendants, the magistrates were compelled to decide in their favour.

The decision encouraged the hands as much as it enraged Old Bob. He declared that the cotton should rot on the ground before he would give in ; and they on their part protested that they would not go back to their work unless he either found them better stuff or consented to pay them by the day until the “rubbish,” as they called it, was consumed. ;

So began the long strike at Birch Dene,

which wrought so much evil, and for some who were concerned in it, and some who were not, ended so tragically.

A few of the men went off to seek work elsewhere, others went a-begging, and left their wives and little ones to shift for themselves ; but most stayed at home, and as there were no trades unions or societies to which they could appeal for aid, their sufferings were great. Miriam, terribly distressed at the turn things had taken, helped them all she could, but it was very little, and had it not been for Colonel Dene, who gave weekly largesses of meal and flour, many would have died of hunger. Miriam made several attempts to soften her uncle's heart ; but the struggle in his mind between pride and self-reproach, obstinacy and regret (for he was too shrewd not to know that he had made a serious mistake), rendered him so morose as to be almost unapproachable ; and for the first time in his life he was rude to his niece, telling her roughly not to meddle with matters which she did not understand. Every day he went to

the factory and spent there several hours, though what he found to do nobody could tell. The apprentices came and went as they liked ; and Robert Ruberry gave them full leave to go altogether if it so pleased them, but as they had enough to eat and nothing to do, none thought fit to profit by his offer.

Another consequence of the strike was a desperate quarrel between the brothers. While the dispute with the hands was in progress Benjamin did not interfere, but after the abortive trial he bitterly reproached Robert for what he had done, protesting that he was going to ruin both the business and themselves, whereupon Robert answered fiercely that as he, and he alone, had made their fortunes, he had a right to waste it if he chose, that he should do just as he liked, and ended by offering to dissolve the partnership and pay Benjamin off there and then.

After this the brothers were not on speaking terms for many days ; and the elder being much put about, sought consolation in drink, or rather, in more drink, for he had never

erred on the side of over abstemiousness. He went nearly every day either to Manchester or Toppleton, and seldom came back sober, often indeed very far from sober.

All this was very hard on Miriam ; it rendered her position well nigh insupportable, and had it not been for Robin and the Denes she would have broken down utterly, both in health and spirits. Robin and she could now meet almost when they would, for her uncle never noticed them, and her father, either because he was at variance with his brother, or his understanding was dulled by drink, so far from objecting to the young fellow's visits to Oaken Cleugh, openly encouraged them.

Nevertheless, the lovers said little of their love. It was no time for self-absorption and mutual admiration, honeyed words and soft caresses. Miriam had both the house and farm on her hands, and it was all she could do to prevent confusion and waste, as her father, even when he was at home, was seldom in a condition to attend to business, and left everything to her. But Robin and she fully

understood each other. He showed his devotion by giving her all the help in his power, looking after the men, seeing that her orders were executed, keeping the farm books, and sparing no effort to save her trouble and worry. Miriam, on her part, treated Robin as he treated her, with that perfect confidence and frank unreserve which, in happy families, prevails between brother and sister. He was both her brother and her lover, and she was both his sister and his sweetheart, and they no more doubted each other's constancy and truth than they doubted the goodness of God or the glory of the sun. They had little time to think or speak of the future, but when they did it was always of a future which should be common to both. "Marriage" and "engagement" they never mentioned; but the little word "we," so fraught with meaning, so suggestive of hope, was continually on their lips.

Miriam did not repeat her attempt to capture Robin's secret. After she had once seen him and Colonel Dene together there was

no need. For her, it had ceased to be a secret. She read the truth in their manner to each other, in casual words inadvertently spoken, and, now that her perception was quickened by love, in their voices, which, as well as the shape, colour, and expression of their eyes, were singularly alike. She had, moreover, learned from Robin that the Colonel regarded her with an almost paternal affection, and that their love had his full approval. This was an inexpressible comfort to the girl, and reconciled her, in a great measure, to the concealment which they were obliged to practise.

Shortly after the beginning of the strike Miriam received a note from Mrs. Dene, asking Miss Ruberry to favour her with a visit later in the day, and expressing regret that the writer's indisposition prevented her from conveying the invitation in person. Miriam went, not in state as aforetime, but alone and on foot, and finding Mrs. Dene reclining on a sofa and looking far from well, she offered to read to her, an offer which the invalid graciously accepted, and when the time came for

her guest to leave she pressed her to come as often as she could "without waiting for a formal invitation."

After this Miriam went to the Hall nearly every week, partly because her hostess always seemed pleased to see her, partly because Robin (doubtless in view of future eventualities) had expressed a wish that she should keep on good terms with Mrs. Dene. As for the Colonel, he was kindness itself, and when Robin was not with her, he always insisted on sending her home in the carriage.

In the mean time there had been letters from Romford both to his wife and Robin. The day after his arrest he was taken from Manchester to London and lodged in the Fleet prison. Beyond his imprisonment, and the ignorance in which he was kept as to its probable duration, he had little to complain of, being supplied with writing materials and books (though not exactly the sort he would have wished), and he had plenty to eat and nothing to do. But prison was prison, after all; he would rather have been weaving alongside

his wife, and if his detention lasted much longer it would be hard to bear ; but as he had been accused of no specific offence, and none could be proved against him, he thought it very likely that he would soon be home again. He sent his respects to Colonel Dene, hoped that all was well at Birch Dene, and that the troubles which they had feared would never come to pass.

And still the strike went on. It had now lasted seven weeks, and, so far as appeared, might last another seven. The hands were as firm as ever, and nobody doubted that Robert Ruberry would rather die than give in. Contrary to general expectation, the "turn-outs" were not only showing great fortitude, but behaving with such singular moderation that most people thought that the strike would terminate (if ever it did terminate) as peacefully as it had begun, and be marked by no more untoward incidents than these which had already occurred. Robin himself had almost come to the same conclusion, albeit knowing something of the temper of the

“turn-outs,” and remembering the incident of the moor and the information obtained by Dr. Dooley, he had his doubts, when one afternoon, as he was returning from Oaken Cleugh, he observed several suspicious looking strangers loitering in the road, and, as it might seem, reconnoitring the factory. Nearly all carried bludgeons, and among them were several of the hands, all talking earnestly, but as Robin passed them they became suddenly silent and eyed him curiously.

When he reached his lodgings Mrs. Rabbits gave him a letter. “Mary Smith [a near neighbour] browt it after yo’ sect off this morning,” she said. “A man as hoo doesn’t know left it at their house last neet, and axed her to bring it here fost thing; but hoo ayther forgot or did not find time till a bit sin.”

The letter was undated, ill-spelt, and pen printed, and bore a strong family resemblance to the threatening letter which Robert Ruberry had received a few months previously. It ran as follows:—

“If you want to keep a wool skin, and happen woss, yo’ll not be neer ayther Factory Hollow or Oaken Kloo, Friday neet. Ven-guns is mine and I will repay seth the Lord. Justiz is gooin’ to be dun on the opresors of the poor and o’ as belongs to ’em. This warnin is sent by one as wishes you well, and wants yo’ to keep out o’ harm’s way so tak’ heed.”

CHAPTER X.

BEFORE THE ATTACK.

WHAT was to be done ?

Coupling the letter with the appearance of so many strangers in the village, and bearing in mind the threats of Simon Peter and the rest, and reading between the lines, Robin had no doubt that the factory and probably Oaken Cleugh were to be attacked that very night, and that the object of the writer (could it be Blincoe ?) was to enable him to put the brothers on their guard and Miriam in a place of safety, for nobody who knew him could possibly suppose that he would sneak away and leave his friends in peril of their lives.

But the emergency was pressing and night near at hand. What was to be done ?

Robin's first thought was to run back to

Oaken Cleugh, show Miriam the letter, and propose that she should go with him forthwith to Dene Hall. Yet even if she should consent to leave her father and her uncle (and he felt sure that she would not), they might meet some of the rioters on the way, and so run into the very danger which they were trying to avoid. From their own people neither Miriam nor himself had much to fear; but these strange men with bludgeons were not likely to show much consideration either to one or the other, for Miriam or himself.

There was only one feasible alternative: to go straight to Dene Hall, and lay the matter before Colonel Dene. By taking the nearest cuts Robin could get thither in less time than it would take him to run to Oaken Cleugh, saddle a horse, and go by the road.

"Where's Jim?" he asked Mrs. Rabbits, as he put the letter in his pocket.

The spinning-master was in charge of the factory and "looked round" every day.

"At the factory. They are 'blowing through,' I think, and 'stopping drops.' It

rained a deal last neet. He'll be coming to his bagging [tea] i' twothry minutes, I expect."

"Well, tell him to lock the gates, and see that nobody gets inside. There are some fellows about whose looks I don't like. I fear they are after no good."

"Hadn't you better go and tell him yersel'?"

"I have not the time. I'm going out again, and have no idea when I shall be back; but tell Jim if anything happens, to send word to Oaken Cleugh at once."

The next moment Robin was on his way to Dene Hall. As he crossed the road he observed, not without a feeling of alarm, that even during the few minutes he had been in the house the number of strangers had appreciably increased. More were coming, and judging from their muddy clogs, travel-stained garments, and hungry looks, they had travelled far and eaten little.

Robin turned into the fields at once, and so soon as he was out of sight, for he did

not want his object to be suspected, set off at a run.

Half an hour later he was in his father's room at Dene Hall.

"God bless me, Robin! What is the matter!" exclaimed Colonel Dene, for his son was bespattered with mud from head to foot, and breathless with exertion and excitement.

"Will you please read this letter, sir?" gasped Robin, handing him the anonymous missive.

"You think it is genuine?" asked the Colonel, after he had read it.

"I do. The writer, whoever he may be, could have no interest in deceiving me, and there is already a crowd of desperate looking men about the factory and Oaken Cleugh gates, and more are coming."

"At any rate it is best to assume that the letter is genuine, and act accordingly. There will be an attack on the factory, you think?"

"The house too. I think they mean to

burn them both down, and kill Mr. Robert, perhaps Mr. Ruberry."

"So bad as that! Where are they—the two Ruberrys, I mean?"

"At home. Mr. Robert came as I left, and Mr. Ruberry has been confined to the house the last two days with an attack of gout."

"We must act at once then, and energetically. And we shall have to depend on ourselves. There is no time to send to Manchester for troops. They would be here about this time to-morrow. Have they any arms at Oaken Cleugh?"

"A shot-gun or two, and a brace of horse-pistols."

"Shot-guns will do. I have three or four here, and my duelling-pistols, and the game-keepers have their fowling-pieces, and there is Harker" (ringing the bell). "We shall be able to make up a force of six or seven, I think."

"Pollit" (to the footman, who just then entered the room), "I want the break round at

once; and tell James to run for the game-keepers. They must bring their guns and come immediately—no matter what they are doing; and send Harker here. Quick, if you please! There is not a moment to lose.”

Whereupon the footman, whom these orders seemed greatly to surprise, went off at a run.

“We cannot defend both the factory and the house. If we divide our forces we shall be beaten in detail, and the only thing in danger at the factory is property.”

“And it is well insured.”

“And if it were not the county would have to make good the damage. But that is a mere detail. Though Robert Ruberry were to lose a few thousands, I don’t think anybody would grieve much. This trouble is all of his making. However, I should not like him to be murdered; and we must see that no harm befalls Miriam and her father.”

“Yes, sir,” said Robin, reddening. “But would it not be best to bring them all here

in the break? These people have nothing against you. They will not attack the Hall."

"Perhaps not; though were Robert Ruberry here I should not feel very sure about it! But, whether or no, the risk would be too great. If the rioters were to block the road—and if they have any wit at all it is exactly what they will do—if they were to block the road we should be almost helpless. We men might possibly fight our way through the mob; but how about the women? For you may depend upon it that the maids won't want to be left. Behind walls, however, we shall be able to make a good defence, even against a thousand rioters. I don't think many of them are armed. Ah, here comes Harker."

Harker was an old soldier, and Colonel Dene's body-servant, a bronzed and grizzled veteran, minus an eye and a few fingers, all lost in action, yet as straight as a ramrod and hardly less vigorous than on the day when he first smelt powder.

"We are likely to have some more fighting,

Harker," said his master. "Are you game for another campaign?"

"Yes, sir; for a dozen—under you. Is it agen the French?"

"No, some rioters, who are expected to attack Oaken Cleugh."

"Only them!" exclaimed Harker, with a disappointed look.

"Well, as there may be several hundreds of them, and we shall only muster six or seven, the odds against us will be quite heavy enough. Are my guns and pistols all in order?"

"All, sir. So is my old musket."

"Good! That makes three double-barrelled guns and a musket, one a piece for us three, and one over. Is there anybody at Oaken Cleugh who can shoot, Robin?"

"Yes, sir. Gib Ridings. He has served in the militia. So, of course, can Mr. Ruberry—he is *hors de combat* though—but there is Mr. Robert. I don't know whether he is much of a shot, but he'll fight."

"Yes; Robert Ruberry is of a fighting sort.

That will make seven, won't it? We three, the two gamekeepers, Gib Riding, and Mr. Robert."

"Yes, sir; seven."

"And all well armed. I think we shall be quite a catch for the mob. One volley, or at most two, ought to be enough—if it comes to that, and I sincerely hope it will not. I shall try both remonstrance and threats before proceeding to extremities. All the same, we must be prepared for the worst; so bring out the arms, Harker, and we will take with us all the ammunition there is in the house."

"Yes, Colonel Dene, but we have no ball cartridge."

"Never mind. Buckshot and slugs will be better than bullets for our purpose. We don't want to kill any of the poor devils. . . . Why, the break is round already. As soon as the gamekeepers come we must make a start. I can only give you ten minutes, Harker."

"That's exactly three more than I want, Colonel," answered the old soldier, as he turned

on his heel and quick marched out of the room.

During the interval Colonel Dene made a hurried visit to his wife's sitting-room to tell her what had happened and what he proposed to do. When he came back after (considering the circumstances) rather a long absence, and looking, as Robin thought, unusually grave, the two gamekeepers were at the front door, the arms and ammunition were safely stowed away in the break, and all was ready for a start.

"She does not want me to go," he whispered to his son. "Thinks there is danger, and I left her in tears. But I told her that I was still a soldier; and though I felt sure the danger existed only in her imagination, I must respond to the call of duty, though it might cost me my life."

He did not tell Robin that, before it came to this, there had been a most painful scene, that his wife had thrown her arms round his neck and entreated him, weeping, not to leave her, and that he had been literally compelled to tear himself away.

As they passed the lodge-gates Colonel Dene informed his companions that he did not intend to take the break beyond the cross roads, about a mile further on. There they would strike across the fields, and so reach their destination unperceived, thereby avoiding any risk of the carriage being stopped by the rioters.

This plan was successfully carried out. Half an hour later, and a few minutes after sunset, they were at the door of Mr. Ruberry's house.

When Miriam saw Robin and Colonel Dene she uttered a cry of joy.

"Thank Heaven!" she exclaimed. "Oh, I am so glad you have come. I was nearly at my wit's end. How kind of you to come, Colonel Dene! Who told you? Robin! I thought so. Thank you, Robin, oh so much. But what shall we do? Jim Rabbits says there are hundreds of people down at the factory, battering in the big gates. They are going to set it on fire, he says, and then they will come here. Listen! Don't you

hear their shouts? What shall we do, Colonel Dene?"

"Defend ourselves and you. That is what we have come for. There are five of us, all well armed, and with the help of Gib Ridings and your uncle—"

"But my uncle is not here?"

"Not here! Where is he then?"

"When he heard the factory was in danger, nothing would keep him back. I did my best to prevent him; but you know how headstrong he is."

"Why," said Robin, "I thought the fate of the factory was a matter of indifference to him. I once heard him say that it was well insured, and he did not care whether they burnt it down or not."

"He said so, I dare say; but I don't think he meant it; very likely did not really believe that anything so dreadful could possibly happen. At any rate, I never saw him so wildly excited in my life as when he heard what was going on."

"They will kill him."

“Oh, I hope not. Surely, Robin, they will not be so cruel! Besides, he disguised himself, put on an old fustian suit, and blackened his face and hands with coal-dust. I should not have known him myself. He looked just like one of those men who go about with the coal-carts.”

“All the same, I shall be very much surprised if he escapes being recognized,” said the Colonel. “But the wilful man must have his way. It is quite out of our power to seek him, much less to help him. Did he go alone, Miss Ruberry?”

“No; Jim Rabbits, the spinning master, is with him. In fact it was Jim who proposed the disguise.”

“Well, he may perhaps come to no harm, after all. Let us hope so. But time is running on, and we have none to spare. Will you tell your maids to put up the shutters, Miss Ruberry? I know the front of the house. What is the rear like? Lead the way, Robin, and we will make an inspection.”

At the back was a large yard, surrounded by a high brick wall.

"They won't easily get over that," continued the Colonel. "How about the door? Pretty stout, but a little staying and pinning would make it all the stouter. Those clothes'-props are just the thing. See to it, Harker, you and keepers, and then come to me."

His next inquiry was about Mr. Ruberry.

"He is in his bed-room, but not in bed, I think," said Robin.

"Is the room to the front or the back?"

"The back."

"So much the better. We shall have to occupy the front rooms. May we see them, Miss Ruberry? We will disarrange the furniture no more than is absolutely necessary. But a few mattresses would be useful."

"Pray do whatever you think necessary, Colonel Dene. Never mind about the furniture," said Miriam, bravely. "I have spoken to my father, and he asks me to thank you on his behalf, and say how sorry he is that he cannot take part in the defence of his

own house. Ah, and I forgot to tell you that before my uncle went out he sent a man on horseback to Manchester to ask for soldiers."

"If they would come quickly they would save us some trouble. The mere sight of a few red-coats would be more effective than all our powder and shot. . . . Here are Harker and the keepers. Come, men, I want you. Put the chairs and things out of the way. You have tools, Harker? Out with the window-frames, and then we shall have no broken glass flying about."

Presently came Gib Ridings with exciting news. The mob had burst in the gates and set fire to the factory, beginning with the "old warehouse"—in which Robin and Blincoe had once spent a night together.

"It'll be aw in a blaze directly," said Gib. "It is now! See how red it is above th' trees, yon! That'll be th' warehouse. It's just full o' cotton, and oil, and tallow, and such like, and when it gets fair howd—! See yo', but—!"

Out of the hollow where lay the factory were shooting myriads of sparks, followed by great tongues of flame, which flared up like fire banners in the starless night.

“Th’ owd barracks makes a rare bonfire, doesn’t it?” continued Gib, admiringly, as if the fact were something to be proud of. “Aw th’ welkin’s fair in a blaze. But it’ll cheat me if somebody does not get hanged for it. It’ll go hard wi’ Mester Robbut if they gettin howd on him. They’re coming up here, and they swear as if we don’t give him up they’ll brun th’ house down and all as is in it.”

“Have they any arms?” asked Colonel Dene.

“Not to speyk on—beside their sticks. I seed some spikes, but I don’t think as there’s more than twenty or thirty guns and pistols and such like among th’ whole lot.”

“It is as I expected. We are more than a match for them. And now, men, to your posts! The front windows, which we have barricaded with mattresses, command the

approach to the house. To each window one man! Harker at the middle window. Mr. Nelson and Gib in this room to the right, the keepers in the room to the left. Load your guns and be ready to kneel behind the mattresses when I give the word. But on no account must a single shot be fired without my order. I shall stand here, between the two doors, so that all may hear me. You have sharp eyes, Robin. Step out of the front door and reconnoitre. You won't be able to see very far, perhaps, but you can listen. Put your ear to the ground. Don't go far, and return the moment you hear anything to report."

CHAPTER XI.

A BAD NIGHT'S WORK.

ROBIN explored the garden and the avenue with all the stealth of an Indian on the war-path, listening intently and looking well about him; and when his eyes had become accustomed to the obscurity he could distinguish objects at some distance. But no living ones were to be seen, and very little was to be heard, all the farm servants being down at the factory or watching the fire from some coign of vantage.

So Robin ventured further, keeping always in the shadow of the trees, until he reached the high road, a point from which he could command a full view of the burning factory. The oil-saturated floors and timbers were all aglow, flames were curling out of the windows,

and lapping over the roof. The minor buildings, and, as it seemed, the apprentice house, were also blazing, Factory Hollow looked like a veritable fiery furnace, or the crater of an active volcano. By putting his ear to the ground Robin was able to hear the hoarse shouts of the rioters and the screams and cries of the spectators. After a while the din appeared to come nearer, and he thought he could distinguish the tramping of many feet.

"They are coming; I must go," he said to himself, and rose from the ground.

At the same moment there appeared before him, as if it had also risen from the ground, a strange wild figure, hatless, coatless, with blackened face, and carrying a half extinguished, yet still glowing torch.

"Nelson!" exclaimed the creature.

"Blincoe! I am very sorry—you are not surely one of the rioters."

"Well, it was me as fired the old warehouse, where Old Bob had me locked up, and the 'prentice house, if that is what you mean."

“But do you know, Blincoe, that if this is proved against you, they’ll hang you?”

“Never mind, I’ve lived a dog’s life ; what matters it if I die a dog’s death ? And after we’ve thrown Old Bob into his blazing factory they may hang me twice over if they like. But neither of us has time to lose. I’m glad I found you. Run to Oaken Cleugh as hard as you can, and get everybody out o’ the house as you care for. They’ll be safe at Dene Hall. There’s a lot goin’ across the fields already to set the haystacks afire, and if Old Bob isn’t found or ’livered up the house will be set afire too, and they’ll kill Ben instead of his brother. But I’ve now’t against Ben, so save him if you can. Run now !”

Robin required no second bidding. Without asking another question he went off at score, and did not stop until he brought up at the front door. Miriam, who was on the watch, opened it.

“Thank Heaven, you are safe !” she whispered. “What a time you have been ! We

feared something had happened, and were all very anxious. Have you heard anything?"

"Yes; come up-stairs, and you will hear, when I tell my—Colonel Dene. But first let us bolt the door and put on the chain."

"So they are going to fire the haystacks!" said the Colonel, when Robin had made his report and answered a few questions. All the better for us; we shall be able to see them; and as the wind is south, none of the sparks will come over this way. These people are more desperate than I expected, probably because they feel as if they were fighting with ropes round their necks. . . . Six double-barrelled guns and a musket; that will make thirteen shots for the first volley. Listen, men! When I give the word to fire—and I fear it will come to that—take careful aim and fire low. Then reload as quickly as you can, and prepare for a second volley,——if a second should be necessary. Are the hatchets and pikes ready, Harker, in case we have to repel an assault?"

"Yes, Colonel, and so is my bayonet."

“That’s right. And now we can only wait the issue of events, and pray that even at the last moment the shedding of blood may be averted.

After this there followed a rather long spell of silence, all listening the while with strained attention.

Harker, who was looking out of a window, was the first to speak.

“They are coming,” he said. “I can see something move in the avenue, like a great black wave. There! Don’t you hear their voices?”

“And see, they have fired the thatch of the big haystack,” cried Miriam, who was standing behind Robin.

“Yes, a few minutes will decide whether it has to be peace or war,” said the Colonel. “Had you not better join your father, Miss Ruberry?”

Miriam would have preferred to stay until the issue was decided; but duty bade her go; and after a whispered, “May God bless you and guard you from harm,” in Robin’s ear, she went.

Meanwhile Harker's great black wave was surging up the avenue. In a few minutes it had overflowed into the garden, and by the murky light of the burning rick the little garrison of Oaken Cleugh saw below them a mass of upturned faces, gaunt and ghost-like, glaring fiercely at the house.

For a while the rioters hesitated, as if they did not quite know what to make of the complete stillness and darkness of the house.

Then, after a whispered consultation, several of the men made towards the front door.

"Halt ! Another step and we fire," shouted the Colonel.

His own regiment could not have obeyed the order more promptly.

"What do you want ?"

"We want Robert Ruberry," said one of the men, whom, from his voice, Robin judged to be Simon Peter. "We want Robert Ruberry. Give him up and we will go away quietly."

"We cannot. He is not here."

"Where is he then ?"

"I don't know."

“Will you let us come in and see for ourselves?”

“No!”

“We shall have to come in in spite of you, then. We’ve got a baulk here as ’ll crack that door down in about ten minutes. You’d better consider now, afore it’s too late. Let us in ’bout any bother and we’ll not hurt a hair of your yeds. But if you force us to break in you’ll have to tak’ th’ consequences. You shall have five minutes to consider; not a second moor. Have you that baulk ready, lads?”

“Ay, have we.”

“Bring it forrud, then.”

The rioters opened their ranks, and half a score men came to the front, carrying a heavy log of timber, which had been fashioned into a rude battering-ram.

“Clap it down till the time’s up,” said Simon Peter, “and then pitch in.”

Colonel Dene stepped up to the middle window, and drew aside the temporary breast-work, so that he might be seen by all.

“Before we join battle, my friends—because, if you persist in your determination, it will be a battle—I would like to have a few words with you,” said he in a loud clear voice. “I dare say there are some among you who know me.”

“Ay, we do that, Colonel Dene. Yo’re not a factory mayster, and yo’re olus good to poor folk.”

“Well, I have tried to be, and I want to be good to you now, if you will let me. Take my advice and hie you home. You have done enough mischief for one night. I know that things are bad with you, and I shall only be too glad to help you to the utmost of my power. I know, too, that hungry men with starving children at home are not likely to be in a mood to listen to reason. But destroying property cannot help you in the least—to say nothing of the risk you run of being transported or hanged. Don’t make bad work worse by committing murder, or forcing me to shoot some of you. For I am here to defend this house and its inmates, and

I shall do my duty ; though I would rather face a hundred French soldiers single-handed than be compelled to fire on my own countrymen. You see this gun ; it is double-barrelled ; there are six men by my side all with their fingers on the trigger, and I assure you, on the honour of an old soldier, that if you come a step nearer, or try to use that battering-ram, we shall shoot. Now for God's sake hie you home, before it is too late. Troops have been sent for and may be here any minute."

This appeal would probably have been successful, for the speech made a decided impression, and the rioters were evidently wavering, when a nameless somebody in the crowd (as was afterwards said, with no evil intent) fired a random shot at the house.

That random shot was Colonel Dene's death warrant.

"I am hit, Harker," he said, putting his hand to his side and staggering against the wall.

"Fire !" shouted Harker, savagely, and the

word was hardly spoken when the nine barrels, which seemed to go off of themselves, were fired into the thick of the throng.

The effect was magical. With a yell of terror and surprise the rioters gave back, then made off as wildly as if they had been a routed army pursued by a relentless foe—even falling over each other in their eagerness to escape—and when the sound of hoofs was heard in the avenue the panic increased tenfold. “Th’ hoss soldiers is coming,” was the cry, and every man ran as if for his life; some one way, some another, over hedge and ditch, through bush and brake.

A few minutes after they had come they were gone. But in those few minutes terrible evil had been wrought. Several of the rioters were stretched bleeding on the lawn, and on a bed up-stairs lay Colonel Dene, pale and almost unconscious. By his side were Miriam and Robin, she wiping the dew of death from his brows, he holding his father’s hand; the others looking silently and sadly on.

“Go for a doctor, some of you!” said

Robin. "You, Harker! Gib will saddle a horse for you. Saddle two horses; let him fetch one doctor, you another. The wounded rioters will want attention. Let the keepers bring them into the house. Go! I will stay with the Colonel."

"Robin! my son," murmured the stricken man.

"Yes, my father."

"Water!"

"Give him brandy and water, Mr. Nelson; plenty of brandy," said the old soldier. "Keep up his strength, till I get a doctor here, which please God shall not be more than half an hour."

The stimulant was given and Colonel Dene revived a little.

"You two!" he said in an almost inaudible voice. "I fear I am dying, my children."

"No, no, no, my father!" cried Robin. "You are badly wounded, but not that. God would not be so cruel."

"I—I am bleeding internally. . . . It is death. . . . My dear boy, who was so long

lost—Sophie's son. Kiss me, Rupert Ravensmere. Miriam too. May God bless you both. . . . I will tell Sophie. Listen, Robin! You are my heir—in my cabinet—papers look—Sophie and little Robin—I shall see them—when I get home—”

Colonel Dene closed his eyes and sank back on his pillow ; yet though he lingered a little longer, he had spoken his last word.

“He is gone, Robin,” whispered Miriam, when she saw that all was over.

Robin, still holding his dead father's hand, put his arm round Miriam, and kneeling by the bed-side wept bitterly, and in a very agony of grief, while she, almost stricken dumb by this overwhelming calamity, silently prayed that her lover might have strength given him to submit to the Divine will.

“To lose him so soon! To find him only to lose him! And such a father!” sobbed the lad. “It cannot be true. Tell me, Miriam, that it cannot be true. Speak to me, my father, one word, only one word.”

“My poor Robin! It is hard, hard for us both. For I loved him, and my heart is breaking for you, dear. But it is God’s will. He knows what is best—”

“But I wanted to keep him longer, Miriam. I wanted to keep him till he was old, till I could feel that I really had a father, and he could know how I loved him. We were so little together, Miriam, only a few times, and he was so gentle and good. . . . That you should die thus, my poor father! . . . And is it not heart-rending that this brave officer and noble gentleman, who fought through so many campaigns, and survived so many dangers by sea and land, should perish in a miserable riot, and at the hands of men whom he desired only to benefit. If he had been less pitiful he would not have died.”

“Christ also perished at the hands of men whom He desired only to benefit; and death is always heartrending—for the living. But your father as truly died in the performance of his duty as if he had fallen at the head of

his regiment, on the field of battle. What end could be nobler! May the lives and deaths of all we love be like his!"

"Amen!" said Robin, fervently. "You are right, Miriam. The very first time I saw him, he said that we were sometimes called upon to risk our lives in the cause of duty and honour. Oh yes, he was a father to be proud of. It is very hard, but I will try—it is a privilege to have known him only for so short a time—and you are left to me—Hark! what is that?"

"The trampling of troops—the neighing of horses—the ring of steel! Can the soldiers be here already? Yes, it must be, and now I think of it, Gib returned at the very moment—it was the galloping of his horse that frightened them so."

"O God! if they had come only half an hour sooner!" groaned Robin.

Here Phœbe, pale and trembling with excitement, burst into the room.

"The horse-soldiers are coming up the avenue, Miss Miriam!" she cried. "One of

the wounded rioters seems to be dying, and Jim Rabbits wants to see you and Nelson in the kitchen. I think it is something about your uncle."

CHAPTER XII.

A RACE FOR LIFE.

MEANWHILE it had fared ill with Robert Ruberry.

It was as Miriam said. Although he pretended to Robin—and possibly tried to persuade himself—that the burning of the factory would be rather a satisfaction to him than otherwise, he felt very differently when it came to the point. He had built it, made his fortune by it, all but lived in it, and for well nigh on thirty years let it occupy his thoughts almost to the exclusion of everything else. Its impending destruction, and the fact that he had been virtually worsted in the struggle with his workpeople, filled him with rage and dismay. He had never doubted for a moment that if he remained firm and “stuck

to his guns" the hands would ask "on their bended knees" to be taken back. Instead of that they were going to burn the place, and with it the bad cotton which had caused all the trouble, and which he had sworn they should use.

The first thing he did on hearing of the gathering of the rioters in Factory Hollow was to send a mounted messenger to Manchester with an urgent request for a military force, the next to disguise himself and go down to the factory with Jim Rabbits. They were just in time to "assist" (in the French sense of the word) at the forcing of the big gates, a proceeding which so incensed Robert, that it was all the spinning master could do to restrain him from committing some imprudence that would reveal his identity.

"If you don't howd yore noise and keep quiet, they'll be finding you out," Rabbits was continually whispering, "and if they do, I wouldn't give a brass farthing for your life. They'd punch yer yed off." And considering the frequent demands for information as to

Old Bob's whereabouts, and the energy with which many of the rioters were consigning his soul to a place of torment, Rabbits was probably right.

After a while the two got separated in a sudden rush of the crowd, and Robert Ruberry was left to take care of himself; and as by this time the threats and execrations of which he was the object, and the resolute bearing of the rioters, had begun to frighten him somewhat, he ceased his mutterings and exclamations and watched the work of destruction in sullen silence, taking mental note of the principal actors therein, with a view to ulterior proceedings.

"It'll be my turn next," he thought; "and if I don't make some of these scoundrels swing for this job my name isn't Robert Ruberry."

So far he had escaped recognition. Spectators and rioters were alike too much occupied to notice him, and none seemed to suspect that he was other than he seemed. But when the main building burst into flames, rendering every object within a radius of several hundred

yards as visible as by day, he heard an exclamation which made the blood run cold in his veins ; for though Robert Ruberry was far from being a coward, he valued his life, and had no particular desire either to be torn in pieces or kicked to death.

“That owd cart driver looks uncommon like Bob Ruberry,” said a young fellow near him.

“Not him,” said another. “‘Th’ owd beggar’s a damned sight too fause to be here just now. They say as he has ayther hidden hissel up at th’ house, or gone off to Manchester.”

And then Robert Ruberry did a foolish thing. Instead of standing his ground, or going into the thick of the crowd, where he might have escaped observation, he crept away, a proceeding which naturally drew attention and roused suspicion. The young fellow who had first spoken expressed the opinion that the supposed carter really was Old Bob after all, and suggested that they should “follow him up and have a gradely look at him.” This proposal was eagerly

accepted, and a score or more of the rioters set off in hot pursuit.

By this time the runaway had got a fair start; but as the way to Oaken Cleugh was blocked by the mob he was obliged to turn in the opposite direction. When he saw that he was being followed, he increased his pace to a run, thereby confirming the suspicions of his pursuers, who redoubled their efforts to overtake him. But albeit no longer young, the hunted man was sound in wind, limb, and eyesight, and in fair condition, and spurred by fear he went at a speed that would have done no discredit to a professional athlete. It was nevertheless evident that, being pitted against much younger men, he could not hope to escape by speed alone, and as he passed an open gate he slipped furtively into a field. This gained him a few minutes respite, his pursuers overrunning the line several hundred yards; but quickly discovering their mistake, they harked back and resumed the chase, for though the fugitive was half-way across the field he could still be viewed.

After this the chase became slower, rather "a good hunting run" than the "fast thing" it had been at first. The burning factory no longer lighted the pursuers on their way, and as the quarry occasionally disappeared behind a fence or sank into a hollow, they were often at fault. More than once he threw them out by a double, and had he been able to keep up the speed with which he started they would probably have lost sight of him and been compelled to give up the chase. But the pace had told, he was getting terribly distressed, breathing in gasps, and reeling as he ran.

At length the hunters and the hunted were in the same field. A few minutes and he would be in their grasp, and for the first time in his life Robert Ruberry tasted the bitterness of death. Yet on he went, and with a mighty effort clambered over a high furze covered bank and dropped, utterly spent, into a deep ditch on the other side. Though quite out of breath, and unable to go on, he had just strength enough to crawl twenty or thirty yards lower down, and cower under a bush.

A moment later the pursuers had surmounted the obstacle, and thinking that their man was still ahead they went on at full speed.

But Robert Ruberry knew that they would soon be back, and when he had recovered his wind he resumed his journey down the ditch bottom, and, sometimes bent double, sometimes on his hands and knees, followed it until he reached an old lane. In the lane was a cottage with a light in the window, and thither the fugitive hurried and entered without knocking.

Before a bright coal fire a woman sat spinning, and on a miniature rocking-chair by her side sat a pretty little girl. At the sight of a man without hat, with a black face, damp with perspiration, bloodshot eyes, torn clothes, and bleeding hands, they naturally set up a scream.

“Hush ! for God’s sake, hush ! and hide me somewhere,” said the intruder, hoarsely. “I am in danger of my life.”

“But who are yo’, and what’s to do ? It seems as I should know yo’—”

“I am Robert Ruberry.”

“Robert Ruberry ! Nay, sure—ly !”

“I am Robert Ruberry. They have burnt the factory down, and a lot of ’em are after me to kill me. Hide me somewhere, woman, and I’ll pay you whatever you like. Quick !”

“Nay, Robert Ruberry, I’ll tak’ no money from you. I wouldn’t soil my hands wi’ it. Yo’re no friend of mine ; they say as you got my dear lad sent to prison. If yo’ did, God forgive yo’ ; but He’d never forgive me, nor Will nayther, if I refused to help yo’ in yo’re need.”

“Thank you ! You are Romford’s wife ? But where will you put me ? Quick ! They may be here any moment.”

“Well, yo’ mustn’t stop here. I have not a place where I could hide a kittling, much less a grown mon. But if yo’ll get into th’ owd elm-tree, at th’ end o’ th’ house theer, I’ll defy ’em to find yo’. Come on, and I’ll gie yo’ a leg up.”

Robert Ruberry followed the wife of the man whom he had so much hated and injured,

and with her help managed to reach the lowest branch of the elm-tree. The further ascent was little more difficult than going up a ladder.

“Get up as high as yo’ can,” she whispered, “and when th’ coast is clear I’ll come and tell yo’.”

Then she went back to the house and quietly resumed her spinning.

Five minutes later the door opened a second time, and in came three or four men, who looked almost as wild and excited as her previous visitor.

“Have yo’ seen onybody gooin’ by?” demanded one of them.

“How could I see onybody gooin’ by and me sitting here spinning, I should like to know?”

“Have yo’ yerd onybody gooin’ by?”

“No. What’s to do? What are yo’ after?”

“We are after Bob Ruberry.”

“Yo’ are after no good, then.”

“We know that. He’s a gradely bad ’un,

and if we catch him, we'll punch his yed off."

"I hope you will not catch him, then. It's bad wark, punching folks' yeds off, let 'em be who they will."

"Can he be here, thinken yo'?" asked one of the men, peering into the weaving shop.

"Oh, yo' can look," said Mrs. Romford, sarcastically. "Look under th' bed, up th' luvver [chimney], onywhere yo' like; yo're quite welcome."

"He cannot be far off," observed another. "He was welly done. I thowt he'd never ha' gotten o'er that last cop [bank]. He's happen in th' dyke bottom aw th' while! Let's go back and look. Thee stand in th' loin, Tommy, and if th' owd beggar comes this way, knock him down and jump on him."

On this they all went off, and Mrs. Romford once more resumed her spinning. Now and then she would go to the door, look out and listen; then return to her work with an expression of satisfaction. When Robert

Ruberry had been up the tree about an hour, she laid the table and spread the cloth, then went to the buttery and fetched a loaf of wheaten bread, a mug of beer and a bacon collop, which after cooking on the coals, she put on a hot plate.

This done, she looked out again, took a turn down the lane, and feeling quite sure that the coast was effectually clear, went to the foot of the elm-tree, and told Robert Ruberry that he might safely come down. He came down very slowly, for he was stiff and cold, and it was as much as he could do to walk into the house.

“There!” she said, pointing to her husband’s arm-chair. “Sit yo’ down, and get summat to eat. You look as if yo’ wanted it. There’s a bacon collop, and there’s home-brewed ale, and there’s a loaf o’ soft bread, and a pat o’ fresh butter.”

Robert Ruberry looked at the woman wonderingly, with brimming eyes.

“You have saved my life, you refuse my money, and now you are giving me of your best,” he said.

“Yo’ mean that soft bread? I get it for Susie; she likes a soft bread butter-cake; but I couldn’t afford it if it was not for th’ pound a week as Colonel Dene ’lows me while my lad’s away.”

“Ay, he has helped you; but I never did. I was your husband’s enemy. You are quite right; I was the means of his being sent to gaol; I wrote to the chief constable, yet you give me of your best!”

“Well, I never could bear malice,” said Mrs. Romford, simply. “Th’ owd Book says if thy enemy thirst give him to drink, and I’m thankful as I’ve been instrumental in saving your life, and when my husband knows he’ll be thankful too. He wants nowt but what’s reyt. Yo’re a hard un, but the Lord’ll happen put it into your heart to see different, and to have a bit more feeling for poor folk. But get yore supper, I pray yo’ now, I’m sure yo’ look welly fit to drop.”

Robert Ruberry bent his head and ate in silence, for there was that in his heart which made speech difficult.

When he had finished, Mrs. Romford took him into the buttery and brought him water to wash his face and hands. Then, perceiving that he wanted to go, she produced an old hat and a much mended cloak.

“They aren’t much to look at, nayther on ’em,” she observed apologetically; “but you could not go ’bout hat, and th’ cloak’ll keep yo’ warm, if it does nowt else. But wait a bit till I run down th’ loin and mak’ sure as there’s none o’ them chaps about as wants to punch yore yed off. Susie will keep yo’ company.”

When she returned, Susie was sitting on Old Bob’s knee. Mrs. Romford seemed pleased.

“Eh, Mr. Robert, if yo’d had a little lass o’ yor own like her yo’d ha’ been a different mon!” she exclaimed.

“And a wife like you! Romford is a fortunate man.”

“He happen doesn’t think so” (smiling). “All the same, I’d liefer have him than yo’ by a good deal. Here, let me help yo’ on with th’ cloak. And tak’ this stick; and if

onybody meets yo'—But all's quiet outside, and I mak' no doubt yo'll get safe home. Good neet to yo'."

"Good night! You have done me a great service, Susan Romford, greater than you know of, and you'll not find me ungrateful."

Instead of finding Oaken Cleugh all dark and silent, as, considering the lateness of the hour, he had expected, there were still lights in the windows; shadows were flitting about inside, and before the door a dismounted dragoon strode to and fro. On seeing a suspicious looking stranger, with a battered hat and a thick stick, the soldier demanded sternly who he was, and what he wanted.

"I am Robert Ruberry."

"It's all right, you can go in. You'll excuse me, sir; but you look so uncommon like one of them rioters that I was just going to arrest you."

The first person he encountered inside was Phœbe.

“Oh, Mr. Robert, how you frightened me!” she exclaimed. “Why, we thought you was killed. They have gone to look for you.”

“Who has gone?”

“Nelson and Jim Roberts, and two of the soldiers.”

“What are the soldiers doing here?”

“Why, don’t you know?” And then she told him of the attack on the house, and the death of Colonel Dene.

“Colonel Dene dead! This is terrible news, Phœbe. But why did these people attack the house? What did they want?”

“They said they wanted you, and if you was given up to them they would go away quiet; and little Blincoe, he lies a-dying in the parlour. Miss Miriam is with him.”

The girl added, that although eight or nine of the rioters had been hit, no one, save Blincoe, was seriously hurt; their wounds had been dressed, and they were under arrest in one of the outhouses, which had been converted into a temporary hospital.

Robert Ruberry took off his hat and cloak and went into the parlour.

Blincoe lay on a sofa; his head was bandaged, one of his arms had been amputated, and he had evidently not long to live.

Miriam sat near him.

"You, uncle!" she said coldly. "They did not kill you, then?"

"No, I escaped with my life, but hardly."

"There are others who have not escaped with their lives. You must have heard about poor Colonel Dene. And this poor lad—draw a little back, the sight of you might excite him—he was rambling just now. The worst is, he is so unrepentant. I have tried, in vain, to bring him to a sense of his condition; but he seems to glory in what he has done."

"I do glory in it," murmured Blincoe; "it was me as set th' old warehouse o' fire, and if I could ha' burnt Old Bob at th' same time I would ha' done it. But I had nowt agen anybody but him. I warned Nelson, and

wrote him a letter. Nelson's a good sort, so are you, Miss Ruberry—if they were all like you and him!”

“Oh, my poor boy, try to think about something else,” said Miriam, pitifully. “Turn your thoughts to Jesus. He is full of compassion for those who believe in Him, and trust Him—and you are very ill.”

“I know what you mean; you mean I am going to die. Well, I don't think I can be worse off than I have been, wherever I go. And it's better than being hanged. . . . If I could only see my mother, and I happen shall, I happen shall—if God be as good as you say He is—” He tried to say something more, but his voice sank into an inaudible whisper, and a little later he passed quietly away.

Robert Ruberry wept.

“Miriam,” he said in a voice tremulous with emotion, “I am answerable before God for these two deaths.”

Miriam looked sorely troubled; but she

made no answer, for she felt that what her uncle said was true.

“What is done cannot be undone,” he continued; “but in the time to come I’ll try to do different. My eyes have been opened. May God forgive me !”

CHAPTER XIII.

A TIMELY OFFER.

It was the day before the inquest. The soldiers were gone, but Birch Dene swarmed with constables : many arrests had been made, and the entire country side was under a reign of terror, for it was rumoured that all who could be proved to have taken part in the burning of the factory and the attack on Mr. Ruberry's house would be tried for their lives.

"What will you do now, Robin?" asked Miriam, as they walked up the road from Factory Hollow where they had been surveying the ruins, and trying to comfort some of the women whose husbands were either in custody or "keeping out of the way."

"About myself, do you mean?"

“Yes; about asserting your claim. You are the lord of the manor and the rightful owner of Birch Dene.”

“Most certainly I intend to assert my claim. But would it not be better to wait until after the inquest and the funeral?”

“I don’t think so. It would look like an after-thought, and your motives might be misconstrued. So long as your father lived and desired you to keep your relationship secret you had no alternative. But perhaps you consider your promise still binding?”

“In the altered circumstances, not at all. It is a matter for my own discretion. And it can make no difference to Mrs. Dene now. She must know sooner or later. How is she?”

“Much better.”

“But the baby is dead?”

“Yes, it lived only a few minutes. You know it was arranged that I should break the news to her, but I was too late, one of the servants had blurted it out to her, and she refused to see me.”

“But why?”

“Partly because she was very ill, and it seems that she has taken a violent dislike to us all.”

“All! You too?”

“Yes, to every one of us. She says that if Colonel Dene had never known us, and, above all, if you had not gone to him on that fatal night, he would be still alive.”

“That is true, and if I could have foreseen—But no, I don’t think I acted wrongly. She might as well blame me for being his son, or him for being kind and brave; for had he been cowardly or selfish, he would not have risked his life as he did. And is not my loss as great as hers? Perhaps when she knows that the same stroke that bereft her of a husband bereft me of a father she will be more just.”

“I am not so sure about that, Robin. She is very much built up in little Willy; and when she learns that he is not the heir, and that you are, how then?”

“Poor boy. I would not hurt a hair of his

head. Is he not my father's son? And I should be very sorry to have Mrs. Dene's ill will. But my duty is clear. I must vindicate my mother's memory at whatever cost."

"And take your true name. It was your father's desire, and it is a duty which you owe to yourself. And the sooner and the more publicly the truth is made known the better, in my opinion. You would not like to attend Colonel Dene's funeral otherwise than as his son, would you?"

"You are quite right, Miriam. I had not thought of that. My head has been in such a whirl that I could hardly think consecutively about anything. But how soon shall I go about it? My father is dead and I have no proofs."

"Yes, you have. I can prove that Colonel Dene acknowledged you as his son and heir in my presence. Surely that is enough?"

"It ought to be, and proof of my father's and mother's marriage can be obtained from Port-of-Spain, and my birth was duly entered in the log-book of the *Agricola*: I know

all the dates and particulars. My father and I had several conversations on the subject—and didn't he say something about papers in his cabinet?"

"Certainly he did. But I don't think that in her present temper Mrs. Dene would let you enter the house, much less examine the cabinet. You must consult somebody, Robin."

"Whom can I consult?"

"I'll tell you what. Let us speak to my uncle. He is a man of business and very shrewd."

"Your uncle!"

"I know what is in your mind. But he has greatly altered. Don't you see it?"

"He looks older."

"He does. But I wasn't thinking so much about his looks as his manner. It is quite different. He is gentler and kinder. The events of the last few days seem to have wrought a complete change in his nature. He says he won't be a party to prosecuting the rioters, that they are more to be pitied than blamed, and he is going to Manchester this

afternoon to see if he cannot prevail on the head constable to obtain Romford's release from prison. I don't think you can do better than consult him, Robin."

"Let us see him then, and if possible before he goes to Manchester. Is he at home?"

"I believe so, and if not we can easily find him."

He was at home, and without any beating about the bush, Robin laid the matter before him.

"It is a strange story," said Robert Ruberry, after he had listened to the end, and asked Robin and Miriam a few questions; "a very strange story, but I have not the least doubt as it's true. I never knew either of you tell a lie, and unless both of you are ready to perjure yourselves, Colonel Dene owned Nelson—Rupert Ravensmere, that is—as his son and heir. Besides, the Colonel said summat to me as confirms it, and though I could not quite make out what he was driving at then, I can now. It wasn't just because you were a bit of a scholar that he set so much

store by you and wanted me to let yo' go to th' Hall whenever you liked. Ay, it's true, every word of it, I do believe. But how to get other folks to believe and make good your claim is a horse of another colour."

"Would not my testimony be sufficient, uncle?" asked Miriam, eagerly. "I am ready to take oath that I heard poor Colonel Dene say that Robin was his son, and the marriage can be proved and his birth, on board that ship—"

"That's all very fine, lass. It may be easy enough to prove as Colonel Dene was married in th' West Indies and had a son born to him as he called Rupert. Th' difficulty will be to prove as Robin, here, and that son are one and the same. He's never been called nowt but Nelson since his mother died, and it was only t'other day as he knew his own name. That'll be rayther a big pill for Mrs. Dene and th' trustees to swallow, while as for Miriam's testimony—Now I'm going to ask you a plain question, and I trust you'll give me a straightforward answer. You two are as thick as ingle weavers. Is there owt between

you? I don't put the question out of idle curiosity. But I cannot advise you right unless I know all the facts: and it might make a difference. Is there?"

The lovers exchanged glances.

"I think I know what you mean, sir," said Robin. "Miriam is very dear to me—"

"You are very dear to her. I thought so. Well, I've nowt agen it, and shall not have, whether Nelson proves his claim or not, but in one way it is rather unfortunate."

"Unfortunate! How so, sir? You admit that I am Colonel Dene's son, and surely—"

"Not quite so fast, my lad, not quite so fast. Wait till I have said my say out. If them as is concerned for Mrs. Dene and her son gets to know—and the question is like enough to be asked—they'll say as Miriam is an interested witness, and her testimony of no account."

"As if Miriam would perjure herself for a thousand Birch Denes!" exclaimed Robin, indignantly.

"Nay, nay, there's no occasion for you to

fly up. I only said as they would say so. When some folks go to law, they will say owt, and take every mean advantage as they can."

"In that case I would rather not go to law."

"I did not say everybody, I said some folks; and it isn't safe to assume as Mrs. Dene and the trustees will not do likewise. But this is a case for a lawyer, and when I go to Manchester I'll see Glazebrook, and talk it over with him."

"I am greatly obliged . . ."

"No, no," interrupted Robert Ruberry. "I mean as you have no occasion to be obliged. It's t'other way about. I consider myself to be deeply in your debt."

"In my debt, sir! How so?"

"Because I have been the means of depriving you of a father. Not as I expected owt o' th' sort. But I was that bent on having my way I would neither hearken to good advice nor the promptings of my own conscience. If right were done it's me as should

have been killed, not him. But right isn't always done in this world by a good deal, for which some of us have reason to be truly thankful. Ay, there's no denying it, Nelson—Ravensmere, that is—I have been the means of depriving you of a father. I cannot supply his place, but I can and will see you through this business. You shall have your rights, lad, if it costs me ten thousand pounds."

Miriam's face brightened with pleasure, and she was beginning to express her thanks, and Robin, whom this unexpected announcement had almost stricken dumb, was following suit, when the old man stopped them.

"If you want to do me a kindness, don't thank me," he said. "I don't deserve it. The only favour I ask is that you will accept my help. It will make me feel a bit easier in my mind; I am glad of the opportunity."

"And the hands, uncle?" said Miriam, significantly.

"You mean that I am in their debt too. I don't deny it, and I must make it up to 'em as I best can. To the families of those

as has gone off or got taken up I shall make such an allowance as will keep 'em alive, and a bit more. I cannot start th' factory, because it is burnt down. But we are going to begin building another as fast as we can, and what with knocking th' old walls down and shifting rubbish, and one thing and another, I dare say we shall be able to find regular work at fair wages for every able-bodied man about th' place."

"Oh, uncle! You make me so glad and thankful!" murmured Miriam. "Thank Heaven! Good may come out of this evil, after all."

"Let us hope so. But the misfortune is as the evil is done and the good is all to come. . . . And now, Nelson—Ravensmere, that is—while I think of it, let me advise you to write to that London lawyer—Chubb, don't you call him?—and tell him what has happened. You say he has papers, and that Bartlett told you to apply to him in case of need. He should be able to help us. Write to him now, and I'll take the letter

with me and post it at Manchester. Be as sharp as you can. I have a lot to do. I've the head constable to see, machinery to order, and Glazebrook to talk to, and it'll ten to one take a long while. He has a long head, but I think his tongue is longer."

Robin made all the haste he could, and by the time Mr. Robert was ready to start the letter for Mr. Chubb was ready for the post.

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. GLAZEBROOK.

MR. GLAZEBROOK (of the firm of Glazebrook, Glasshouse, and Golightly) was a lawyer of the old school, slim as to his person, and past middle age. He wore a black coat with broad lappets, black breeches, and black silk stockings. His white hair was brushed away from a high square forehead and tied behind in a *queue*; he had dark eyes, and a refined, intelligent face, and his manner was quiet and dignified.

Mr. Glazebrook paid marked attention to his client's statement, interrupting him only to make clear some point which he had not fully understood.

“Well, what do you think about it all?”

asked Robert Ruberry when his tale was ended.

Mr. Glazebrook raised his eyebrows, and with his jewelled fingers took a thoughtful pinch of snuff from a golden box.

“You have confidence in this youth, I suppose; you think he is truthful?”

“I am sure he is, I have watched him closely, and I never knew him tell a lie or do owt as was not straightforward. The best proof as I can give of my confidence in his story is as I am ready to back him up to the tune of ten thousand pounds.”

“I am glad to hear you say so, my dear sir, for this story is very improbable, and the inducement to lie very considerable.”

“But assuming that it's true?”

“Then I say, *cædit questio*. But allow me to observe that it is a very great assumption, and how are we to get other people to accept it, I should like to know?”

“You don't think we have a case then?”

“Don't draw hasty conclusions, my dear sir. I did not say so; but it is my way

always to look first at the weak points of a case, the strong ones can take care of themselves. It is likely enough that Colonel Ravensmere Dene, then a young man, married a young woman in the West Indies, and concealed the marriage from his friends ; that a child was born on board the ship which conveyed them to England, and that he hid them both away in a Hampshire or Devonshire village. Such things have happened over and over again, and the marriage and the birth, if they really took place, can easily be proved. Moreover, it is likely enough that Mr. Ravensmere requested his wife to meet him in London, and failed—against his will—to keep the appointment. But now comes in the element of doubt and uncertainty. Mr. Ravensmere returns from the wars, seeks his wife and child, and after making a thorough investigation, is so convinced they are dead that he marries again. Meanwhile, a woman, who refuses to give her name, is convicted of felony and dies in the dock of the Old Bailey, leaving a child who forgets his name,

and only remembers it a few weeks or months ago, when he is brought in contact with Colonel Dene. According to your theory this woman was the first Mrs. Ravensmere; and the child is her son, and heir to Birch Dene. But how are we to prove all this, prove to the satisfaction of a court of justice that the woman who refused to give her name was Mr. Ravensmere's lawful wife, and the youth called Nelson his legitimate son?"

"By Colonel Dene's acknowledgment and his acts."

"Acts may be differently construed, while as for his alleged acknowledgment, Miss Ruberry is, unfortunately, the only independent witness, and it might be plausibly urged that being in *articulo mortis* at the time, he did not know what he was saying, or that she misunderstood his meaning. All the same, I freely admit that if Colonel Dene had attached his signature to a deed duly attested, in which the young man was clearly identified and fully acknowledged, it would go a long way—a very long way—towards con-

vincing a jury. But even then it might be urged . . .”

“What?”

“That he was mistaken.”

“Not he; Colonel Dene was not a fool, to be imposed upon by the first raw lad as claimed to be his son. And Robin could tell him of things that nobody knew of but them two. But never mind that; how is it to be—fight or give in?”

“How can you ask so absurd a question, my dear sir? I am never eager for litigation when a client has everything to lose and nothing to gain by an action. I say compromise or retire, lest worse befall you.”

“So that is your advice, Mr. Glazebrook?” said Robert Ruberry, with evident chagrin; “you advise me to take no steps whatever to make good Rupert Ravensmere’s claim, for I am as fully convinced as he is Colonel Dene’s son as I am of my own identity?”

“Did I not warn you against drawing hasty conclusions, my dear sir?” said the lawyer, as he helped himself to another pinch

of snuff. "It is just the other way about with our young pretender. He has everything to gain, and nothing to lose. Therefore I say fight, fight to the last ditch—the more especially as you are good enough to provide the sinews of war."

"Now you speak!" said Robert Ruberry with a gratified smile. "But what think you of his chances?"

"Until I have thoroughly explored the case and pieced together the facts, which will require a little time, you must kindly permit me to reserve my judgment. And I think we had better not begin operations until after the funeral and the reading of the will. How do we know that it does not contain some mention of our young pretender, or that documents may not be forthcoming which will materially aid us in establishing his claim? Colonel Dene, as a man of the world, and knowing the uncertainty of life, would surely not leave the identification of his son to chance; and, if I understand rightly, he made some mention of papers."

“I never thought of that before. You think, then, that we had better say nowt at all till after the funeral?”

“No, I said we had better not begin active operations till after the funeral. If our young friend would like to give out that he claims to be the heir I see no harm in it, but rather good. And, by the by, I should be pleased to see Mr. Rupert Ravensmere Dene—as, I presume, he proposes to call himself—on an early day, if it would quite suit his convenience to favour me with a visit.”

“Of course you must see him. He shall come the day after the funeral, and he’ll happen have news for you. Anyway, he can tell you a good deal more than I can.”

“Naturally. But I should also be pleased to see him on purely personal grounds. A young gentleman of so varied experience can hardly fail to be entertaining company, and I am curious to make his acquaintance. . . . You must go! Well, take care of yourself, my dear sir—on your way home I mean. These are terrible times, Mr. Robert, terrible

times. I fear that we are on the eve of a sanguinary insurrection, a general uprising of the lower classes. The magistrates here have expressed the same opinion in a strongly-worded memorial, which they have just addressed to the Home Secretary. They decline to be answerable for the peace of the district, unless more troops are placed at their disposal. Yes, terrible times, and the future of the country is very dark. You will not forget that it is expedient for me to see our young friend as soon as may be. Good-day to you, and a safe journey home."

From the lawyer Robert Ruberry went to the chief constable. But he found that it was not nearly so easy to get a man out of prison as to get him in. The service rendered by Susan Romford did not seem to the chief constable a sufficient reason for releasing her husband.

"Besides," he said, "I have nowt to do with it. I have no more power to release him than you have. It's a case for the Government, and while these riots are going on the very last

thing as they'll think of will be to enlarge political prisoners. Instead of that they are going to be more strict with 'em, and not let 'em communicate with their friends as freely as they have done, and shift 'em from prison to prison so as to prevent any attempt at rescue. And Romford is a dangerous character. You said so yourself; I can hold out no hope whatever, Mr. Ruberry."

"But how long do you think they will detain him?"

"Till the country is quieter, and happen a bit longer."

This was final, for though the chief constable might not be able to order Romford's release, the Government were sure to be guided by his opinion as to its expediency; and Robert Ruberry went away sorrowful, his mind more than ever a prey to vain regrets, and burdened with the sense of obligations which he was unable to acquit.

CHAPTER XV.

ANOTHER FORTUNE.

WHEN Robin (who had been subpoenaed as Robert Nelson) appeared at the inquest and was told to "take the book," he made a preliminary objection.

"I am quite willing to be sworn," he said, "but my name is neither Robert nor Nelson."

"What is it, then?" asked the coroner.

"Rupert Ravensmere Dene."

"Dear me! This is very awkward. How could such a mistake arise, I wonder? Were you in any way related to the deceased gentleman, may I ask?"

"I am his son."

"God bless me! But surely that is impossible. You don't mean his legitimate son—his son and heir?"

“Yes, sir, I do. But allow me to remind you that I am here to give evidence, not to answer questions about myself . . .” he was going to say, when he was interrupted by exclamations of surprise and incredulity from the jurymen—most of whom were Birch Hall tenants.

“It’s quite true,” observed Robert Ruberry, when the quiet was restored. “I know all about it. Colonel Dene would have acknowledged him openly if he had lived a while longer; but now that he is dead there is no reason for Nelson—Ravensmere, that is—to sail under false colours any longer.”

“I am glad to hear you say so—in one sense,” returned the coroner, “for I was beginning to think that the young gentleman had lost his senses—but this is no business of mine. I shall enter his name as Rupert Ravensmere Dene, commonly called Robert Nelson.”

“Rupert,” corrected Robin.

“Rupert, then. And now let us proceed.”

The jury, instructed by the coroner, had

no difficulty in arriving at a verdict. In the case of Colonel Dene they gave it as wilful murder against the rioters in custody, who had taken part in the attack on Oaken Cleugh, and "other persons unknown," and the killing of Blincoe was declared to be "justifiable homicide."

But for the moment, at least, the popular mind was far less occupied with the result of the inquest and the fate of the rioters than Robin's claim to be the heir. The stories told about him, and the theories by which it was attempted to account for his having remained so long unknown, were stranger than the facts themselves.

These tales bred others, until the number of them became quite bewildering. The moorland farmers did not know what to make of it at all, and beyond the safe remark that it was "a gradly queer do," declined to express an opinion; but the factory folk believed in Robin thoroughly, and warmly espoused his cause—many of them, indeed, finding confirmation strong of his story in his striking

likeness to the late Colonel Dene, albeit, like everybody else, they had failed to detect it in the latter's lifetime.

Robin, it need hardly be said, was not invited to the funeral; but he met the procession at the church-gate, attended the service in the church, and followed his father's body to the grave. None of the mourners or notabilities who were present addressed him, yet he was the observed of all observers, and the subject of much whispered comment; some, like the factory folks, thinking that they could find in his features a decided resemblance to those of the man whose son he claimed to be.

On the following day Robin went to Manchester to see Mr. Glazebrook, taking with him a letter which he had just received from Mr. Chubb. The gist of it was that the writer felt all the more pleased to hear from Rupert as he had latterly been trying to find out what had become of him, in order to make a communication arising out of the affairs of the late Mr. Bartlett, and to take his instructions

thereanent. But as he should have occasion to make a journey to the north of England in the course of a few days, he would travel by way of Manchester, and make the communication in question when they met. Mr. Chubb was unaffectedly glad to hear that Mr. Ravensmere Dene had remembered his name and found his father (though, alas ! to lose him so soon), and that he was heir to a great estate. His surprise, however, was not so great as it might have been had he not felt convinced from the first that he came of a highly respectable family. When Mr. Chubb came to Manchester he would bring with him all his notes bearing on the case, and he concluded by naming the day on which he expected to arrive, and asking Robin to meet him at the 'White Bear.'

This letter Robin showed to Mr. Glazebrook, with whom he had a long interview, in the course of which the old lawyer questioned and cross-questioned him almost as keenly as if he had been examining a hostile witness, making the while a multiplicity of notes.

“So far, good, Mr. Ravensmere Dene,” he said at length, after refreshing himself with a pinch of snuff. “I think I now know as much about the case as you can tell me, and I am free to confess that though, when Mr. Robert Ruberry laid the matter before me the other day, I deemed our chances of success exceedingly remote, your statement is so clear and coherent that I begin to think we may possibly establish your claim after all. I may say, too, now that I have had the honour of making your acquaintance and the advantage of hearing your story from your own lips, I am as fully persuaded of your truthfulness and honour as Mr. Robert Ruberry himself.”

Robin bowed.

“I believe everything you have told me, but we cannot expect the Dene trustees to give up possession of the estate on your mere assurance that you are Colonel Dene’s son by a previous marriage. Even your father’s assurance to this effect, were he to give it, would not justify them in doing so.”

“What is the use of going on then?” asked

Robin, with a look of intense disappointment ; “ what proof can be stronger than my father’s acknowledgment made in the presence of Miss Ruberry and myself ? I think that Harker, his body servant, also heard him call me his son.”

“ Did he, indeed ? I must make a note of that. I will tell you why his mere assurance would not be sufficient. He might be mistaken or deceived. Cases of mistaken identity are as plentiful as blackberries. But his verbal or written acknowledgment, supported by a few facts and corroborated by a chain of circumstantial evidence, would render our position impregnable. This is what we must look for, and I hope Mr. Chubb will be able to add a few links to our chain, which, as yet, is far from complete. When he comes to Manchester you must bring him hither. Meanwhile, I shall take the first steps.”

“ But is there any necessity for immediate action ? I should be very sorry to do anything to annoy Mrs. Dene. She must be in great trouble, and her little boy is my half-brother, you know.”

“Don’t alarm yourself on that score, my dear sir, I am the last man in the world willingly to annoy a lady. I am only going to fire off a blank cartridge in the shape of a very courteous letter to Mr. Pomeroy, the family solicitor—with which the trustees will have to deal. Mrs. Dene will no doubt be made acquainted with the contents, but as she has already heard that you claim to be the heir she cannot be much affected thereby. In this letter I shall merely notify Mr. Pomeroy that you are the late Colonel Dene’s son, and therefore heir to the settled estates, request permission to lay before him a statement of the case and particulars of the evidence with which I have been furnished, and beg of him to inform me, so soon as may be, what course the trustees propose to adopt.”

“Do you think he will answer it?”

“Certainly, if only as a matter of professional etiquette. But what sort of answer it will be is another question. Much will depend on the papers which your father mentioned as being in his cabinet.”

“And suppose the answer is evasive, or otherwise unsatisfactory, what then?”

“Then I think we should have to take out a writ of ejectment.”

“That would mean a trial, I suppose?”

“Sooner or later. But I should not try to bring matters to an issue for the present. Our case, as yet, is by no means strong, and we shall lose nothing by being deliberate.”

A few days later Robin and Robert Ruberry met Mr. Chubb at the ‘White Bear.’ He had arrived the night before after a journey of twenty hours.

“You are altered,” he said, as he and Robin shook hands, “but I should have known you; could have picked you out of a crowd, in fact. But how you got down to Lancashire is a mystery. Moses Weevil managed to spirit you away very cleverly. But with your consent we will make the rascal disgorge.”

“Disgorge what?”

“The property left by Mr. Bartlett to you and Solomon Slow.”

“But there was no will.”

“Yes, there was, and I have it now in my possession. As you no doubt remember, I was very ill when poor old Bartlett died, and for several months afterwards quite unfit for business. They sent me to Bath, and when I returned to town I was surprised beyond measure to find that Weevil had swept everything off, and that you had disappeared. As I knew that Bartlett had made a will, I concluded that his nephew had got hold of the document and destroyed it, but having not the slightest shred of proof to go on I could of course do nothing. Neither could I find out what had become of you. Moses protested, with tears in his eyes, that he had an ardent desire to keep you and cherish you, but that you had not only repaid his would-be kindness with base ingratitude, but run away with some of his money in your pocket.”

“The old rascal !”

“Of course I did not believe him. I applied to Solomon Slow, but neither did he know whither you had gone ; he seemed hurt

that you should have left without saying good-bye."

"I called at his house, but he was not at home, and I could not wait."

"All a part of Weevil's plot, I have no doubt. However, he is most beautifully hoist with his own petard. But I am anticipating. He was extremely deferential in his manner, not to say fawning, and for some reason best known to himself actually made me a present of the oaken desk which used to stand in Bartlett's room. I accepted it because I was glad to have a memento of my old friend, and had it sent to my house, where it remained unused and little observed until one day some two months ago, when my wife suggested that it should be overhauled, the drawers taken out, and thoroughly cleaned. I agreed, of course, and all the more readily as I wanted to use it. Well, what do you think they found?"

"The will?"

"Yes, the will."

"In a secret drawer?"

“There is no such thing in the desk. No, it had been accidentally pushed over the end of one of the drawers, and so remained hidden. It is very small, written on a single sheet of Bath post.”

“As likely as not Weevil did it himself, when he was looking amongst poor Mr. Bartlett’s papers the night he died.”

“I have not the slightest doubt he did. You should have seen the old rascal’s face when I told him. It was as good as a play.”

“You have told him, then?”

“Of course; I am one of the executors. Mr. Yockleton is the other. But you will want to know the particulars. Bartlett directed that his business should be carried on by Solomon Slow, with your help, until you came of age. After that, if you were so disposed, you and he could enter into partnership. Meanwhile Slow was to take half the profits, the balance to accumulate for your benefit. In the event of your not agreeing about the partnership, the business was to be

sold. Out of the proceeds Slow was to receive five hundred pounds, the remainder, after payment of fifty pounds a piece to his executors, and a like sum to the Old Fogies' Club, and legal and other expenses, to go to you. You are the residuary legatee, in fact."

"And how much might the remainder be, do you think, Mr. Chubb?" asked Robert Ruberry.

"I cannot exactly say. Weevil disposed of Bartlett's business and converted all the assets into cash, and if he were to give an account I should not believe him. The rascal could not tell the truth if he tried. But I always understood that Bartlett was worth about four thousand pounds."

"But there was a good deal of it in books, was not there?"

"Most of it—nearly all, in fact, save a bit of freehold land in the city."

"Call it two thousand then, to be on the safe side. Well, two thousand pounds is better than nowt. But can you make this Weevil pay up? Is he worth powder and shot?"

"Certainly; Moses is a rich man, though

he does plead poverty and pretends that he had lost every penny he had possessed in unlucky speculations. Oh, I'll make him pay, never fear ! ”

“ So Rupert Ravensmere is heir to two fortunes—Birch Dene and a book-shop ! If he does not get one he'll happen get' t'other. You are lucky, Robin.”

“ That remains to be seen. My life, so far, has been a strange mixture of good and evil fortune. It may continue so to the end. I suppose Weevil took such pains to get rid of me because he suspected the existence of a will ? ”

“ Of course he did. He must have had a shrewd idea, too, that you were the heir. That was why he was in such a hurry to reduce the estate to possession. He is nothing if not suspicious, and his calculation doubtless was that, though a will might subsequently be found, nobody would trouble him if you were *non est*. Had he been a bolder man he would probably have got rid of you in a more summary fashion. However, the rascal took

his measures well, I must give him that credit ; and but for one or two of those accidents which, fortunately, so often frustrate rascally schemes he would have succeeded. Solomon Slow is very wild about it all ; threatens to wring Weevil's neck, and expresses an ardent desire to finger his five hundred pounds. I rather think he is indulging in a few extra extravagances on the strength of it already."

"I should dearly like to see him. What is he doing ?"

"He is in a book-shop at Winchester—went without leaving his address, and I had a great difficulty in finding him. I suppose I have your authority to proceed against Weevil ?"

"Certainly, and make the miserly wretch disgorge to the last penny. However, he did me a service without intending it ; for had he not made me a workhouse apprentice I should not have got to Birch Dene and found my father and . . . "

"Your fortune."

“Yes,” said Robin, gravely. But the fortune he meant was Miriam Ruberry, not the estate. “And now I think it is time we went to Mr. Glazebrook’s office. He said he would expect us about two o’clock.”

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CAMPAIGN OPENS.

THE first proceeding, after the two lawyers had been introduced to each other and a few compliments exchanged, was the perusal by Mr. Glazebrook of Mr. Chubb's notes, which were as full and clear as a barrister's brief.

"These are important links in the chain we have to forge, Mr. Ravensmere," said Glazebrook, when he had gone through the notes, read Colonel Dene's letter to Sophie, and inspected the miniature and the trinkets. "True, this letter is not signed in full; but there will be no difficulty, I apprehend, in showing that it is in your father's handwriting, and that this miniature is his likeness. The fact that they were in your mother's possession is presumptive evidence that she

was the lady to whom he was married at Port-of-Spain, and it can, no doubt, be shown that you are the little boy called Robin, mentioned in Mr. Chubb's notes."

"I can prove that," said Chubb, "so can several others. That white lock alone would be sufficient to identify him. How well I remember pointing it out to Bartlett."

"White lock! I see, at the back of Mr. Ravensmere's head. That is an important point, and suggests an idea. Would it be possible, do you think, to find somebody at Lulworth who could recognize Mr. Ravensmere by means of that lock, somebody who knew him and his mother when they were living there as the wife and son of the late Colonel Dene?"

"I think it would," said Robin. "I remember the place quite well, and I have no doubt that I could find people there who remember us—my mother and myself, I mean."

"You must go then and look them up; for I have received a letter from Pomeroy, from which, so far as I can make it out, the

trustees regard you as an impostor. Listen ; I will read it."

"DEAR SIR,

"I am favoured with your letter of the 10th inst., which I have laid before my clients and taken their instruction there-upon. They are aware, as well from papers found in the late Colonel Dene's cabinet, as from information communicated to them by Mrs. Dene, that he was married in early life to a lady of the name of Mendoza, who bore him a son. But they are also aware, from a statement made not many weeks ago by the Colonel himself to Mrs. Dene, that long before his second marriage the lady in question and her son died in London under very melancholy circumstances. For this reason, and for others that will readily occur to you, my clients regard it as quite impossible that your client can be the late Colonel Dene's rightful heir, and I may add that it would require very strong evidence indeed to convince them to the contrary.

"I am, dear sir,

"Your obedient servant,

"THOMAS POMEROY."

“Well, there is not much of it,” observed Ruberry, “but what there is, is to the point. No shillyshally or nonsense.”

“As you say, it is to the point. At the same time you must judge a letter of this sort as much by what it does not say as by what it does. Unless I am greatly mistaken, the trustees are acting less on Pomeroy’s opinion than their own.”

“How so?”

“Because they are not acting as I think Pomeroy would have advised them to act, as I or any other sensible lawyer would have advised them. What say you, Mr. Chubb?”

“I am quite of your opinion. Had I been in Pomeroy’s place I should have advised the trustees to receive your statement, if only that they might form some idea as to what sort of a case you have, and the nature of the evidence on which you rely. Let us get to know all we can, I should have said.”

“And no doubt Pomeroy did say it. But clients sometimes take the bit in their teeth

and act on their own opinion, and so, I suppose, it has been in this case. I shall now take out a writ of ejectment, just to show them that we are in earnest. And we have scored one point in the game. The marriage and the birth of a son and heir are admitted. We have only to prove that this son is our young friend here. Rather a big 'only' perhaps; nevertheless I think that with patience and diligence it may be done. Don't you think so, Mr. Chubb?"

Mr. Chubb did think so, and before the conference broke up it was arranged that he should act as Mr. Glazebrook's London agent in the matter, and accompany the plaintiff to Hampshire in order, if possible, to obtain further evidence in support of his identity.

Mr. Glazebrook was quite right in his surmise that the trustees were not acting altogether in accordance with Pomeroy's advice. He had, in fact, strongly urged them to let Glazebrook, as he proposed, state the grounds on which Robin claimed to be the heir, and had they been strong men and left

to themselves they would doubtless have done so. But they were not strong men, and they were not left to themselves. Before deciding they consulted Mrs. Dene, and Mrs. Dene absolutely refused to listen to reason. That a miserable factory boy, as she called him, should claim to be her son's elder brother and heir to Birch Dene aggravated her beyond measure. She spoke of him as a "base, ungrateful impostor," and the bitterness of her anger against him seemed to be even greater than her sorrow for her husband's death. The idea of taking any step which implied that his claim might conceivably be other than fraudulent was odious to her. She even asked Mr. Pomeroy whether Robin could not be prosecuted, and wanted him to treat Glazebrook's letter with silent contempt.

The trustees might of course have taken their own line, but being good-natured, easy-going men, in their sympathy with Mrs. Dene, and rather terrorized by her passionate utterances, they could not muster up courage to oppose her wishes. Moreover, from her point

of view, which was in a great measure theirs, “the miserable factory boy” had not a leg to stand on.

Was it not absurd on the face of it, she asked, to suppose that if Nelson were really Colonel Dene’s son, he would have kept the fact to himself until after the Colonel’s death? Did anybody believe that a gentleman’s son would consent to work in a factory for a single day, much less for years? Was it not plain that Nelson had somehow or other discovered the secret of the Colonel’s previous marriage, and was now making a nefarious attempt to supplant her son? Did anybody ever hear of such villainy? After all the Colonel’s kindness to him, too! But her husband always had an unfortunate weakness for low people, and this was the result. It was to please him that she had taken up Miriam Ruberry. She had once thought her a nice girl—for her station—but she felt persuaded now that Miriam was just as bad as Nelson, and that this vile plot had been hatched between them. To enter into a cor-

respondence on the subject, either with Glazebrook or anybody else, would be nothing less than a degradation.

Yet, though Mrs. Dene's influence with the trustees was great, and they felt as sure as herself that Robin was an impostor, and his claim a fraud, they could not, as men of the world, altogether ignore the advice of the family lawyer, and after some hesitation allowed him to return a civil and guarded answer to Glazebrook's letter. But when Glazebrook fired his first shot, in the shape of a writ of ejectment, their confidence received a rude shock, and it began to dawn on their minds that there might be "something in it" after all. This was undoubtedly Pomeroy's opinion.

"Of course there is something in it," he said. "Do you think that Glazebrook would take up a palpably fraudulent case, or that Robert Ruberry, who is one of the keenest men alive, would place his purse at the disposal of one whom he knew to be an impostor?"

“He perhaps thinks we will buy him off,” rather weakly suggested Mr. Giles, who was a sleeping partner in a large banking-house.

“That’s it—an attempt at blackmailing,” observed Mr. Tilbury, the other trustee, a neighbouring county gentleman, who, except when his wife or Mrs. Dene interposed her veto, invariably followed his lawyer’s advice.

Pomeroy shook his head.

“I don’t think so at all,” he said. “Glazebrook is neither a sharper nor a pettifogger, and you may be sure that Robert Ruberry would not risk his money in such a hopeless speculation, for they cannot help knowing that there is no possibility of any blackmail being forthcoming. You have no power, as trustees, to buy the claimant off, and I don’t think either of you gentlemen” (smiling) . . .

“No, by jingo!” exclaimed Mr. Tilbury, with superfluous energy. “It is quite enough to be a trustee, without having to pay the piper.”

“And in justice to a family of nine children, I positively decline to incur any responsibility

whatever," said Mr. Giles, as he buttoned up his breeches'-pocket. "But what is to be done? That is the question—what is to be done?"

"We must put in an appearance, of course, and let the action proceed. It is not merely our duty, we have no alternative. The heir in possession is the infant, William Ravensmere Dene. We know no other heir, and until and unless the plaintiff proves his case there can be no other, so far as we are concerned. I advise you neither to yield nor compromise. It is our clear duty to protect the interests of Mrs. Dene and her son. My only regret is that you would not let me accept Glazebrook's offer to give us a statement of his alleged facts. We should have been all the wiser and none the weaker for it. It is always a mistake to hold an opponent cheap, especially such a dark horse as this Nelson. We know our own case, but we don't know his, and many an equally improbable story has turned out to be true."

The serving of the writ made an impression

even on Mrs. Dene, albeit she would not for the world have admitted it in words.

“Their impudence is as great as their folly!” she exclaimed. “What do they hope to gain by it? Nelson is a villain. He wormed himself into my poor Eustace’s confidence, only to betray him. I shall begin to think soon that he contrived the attack on Oaken Cleugh, in the expectation that my husband would be killed. He is quite capable of it, or of any other atrocity. While as for those Ruberrys, I have not words to express my detestation of their conduct. Surely the fact that my husband lost his life in defending their property should be enough to prevent them from taking part in this vile attempt to rob his son of his inheritance. If the claim were not so utterly preposterous there might be some excuse for them. But it is so entirely unsupported by evidence, so altogether impossible and absurd. Don’t you think it is, Mr. Tilbury, impossible and absurd?”

“Quite so, madam, quite so. Impossible and absurd,” answered Mr. Tilbury confidently,

though he was not nearly so sure about it as he pretended. "What I cannot understand is, how Robert Ruberry, who is sound in politics and a man of means, can mix himself up in such a discreditable affair."

"What can you expect from tradesmen, Mr. Tilbury? Everybody knows that they make their money by robbing their workpeople and cheating their customers. If my poor husband had kept the Ruberrys in their place this trouble would never have happened."

"You are quite right, madam, it is always a mistake to be too familiar with inferiors," responded Mr. Tilbury, who made it a rule never to contradict Mrs. Dene—or his own wife.

Meanwhile Robin and Mrs. Chubb were on their way to Hampshire.

They were so far successful in their quest that they found several people of undoubted respectability—the parson, the doctor, and others—who had a perfect recollection of Mrs. Ravensmere and her son, and could corroborate Robin's story to the letter. But when it came to identifying the young man who called

himself Ravensmere Dene with little Robin Ravensmere, who had left the village a dozen years previously, there was a difficulty. He had greatly altered, and no wonder. The doctor and the parson's wife recognized the lock of white hair, and an old servant of Mrs. Dene, after a minute examination of Robin's features, professed her readiness to swear that he was the same, quite independently of the fact that he was able to remind her of many matters and incidents which could be known only to themselves.

Chubb made copious notes, and took down the names of all whose evidence was likely to be of use.

"We are getting on," he observed to Robin, "adding a few more links to our chain, as Glazebrook would say. But it is not as complete as I should like it to be yet. We want something more from your father. His recognition of you is good, as far as it goes, but his failure to acknowledge you openly looks queer, and will want a good deal of explanation. Your evidence and Miss Ruberry's

will be taken *cum grano*, as that of interested parties, and against it we have Mrs. Dene's positive declaration that her husband distinctly told her not many weeks before his death, that his first wife and her child died in London; and he certainly acted as if he thought so. And it is an unfavourable feature that he did not mention you in his will, though, to be sure, the will was made several years before you found each other. Still, he might have added a codicil. These are points that would tell very much with a jury, and we must try to get over them, somehow."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DOOM OF THE RIOTERS.

ONE of the minor results of the riots was the reconciliation of the brothers and the restoration of domestic peace at Oaken Cleugh.

The elder, being neither critical nor unbelieving, not only credited Robin's story at the first telling, but, like many other of the wise-after-the-event order, affirmed that he had suspected something of the sort all along. When he heard that Miriam and the heir to Birch Dene had "made it up," his delight was unbounded, and expressed, occasionally, in a fashion which was not altogether agreeable to the parties chiefly concerned. He evidently thought that the realization of his hopes for his daughter's matrimonial future was in great

part due to his own management and forethought.

“Didn’t I tell you, Robert?” he said one day to his brother. “Didn’t I tell you as Miriam would marry a real gentleman by birth and breeding? And you only laughed at me. Let them laugh as wins. Who is right now, I should like to know? Tell me that; who’s right now?”

“Well, if it comes to that, I don’t think you are much righter than anybody else,” returned Robert, with a touch of his old cynical humour. “You said as she would marry a highflyer, and I never said she would not. All I said was, as she would please herself; and that is just what she has done. They made it up before she knew as he was owt but a factory lad.”

“Nay, nay, Miriam has more sense.”

“Ask her then. And if you guessed as he was a highflyer all along, why did you fight so shy of him and warn her?”

“Well, I never heard owt like that in all my life! Who but you put me up to it?”

“What if I did? It only shows as I was just as blind as you; we’ve no occasion to fratch [boast], neither of us, Ben.”

Ben was silenced, though he did not seem convinced, and he took an early opportunity of putting to Miriam the question which his brother had suggested, albeit in a roundabout and (as he thought) rather a delicate way, his respect for his daughter having been greatly increased by her betrothal to the heir.

“Where’s Robin this morning?” he asked Miriam, by way of leading up to the subject.

“Down at Factory Hollow, helping my uncle to plan the new buildings.”

“Ay, they’re very throng just now, and if it wasn’t for my gout I’d be there too. Robin seems to be making himself very useful.”

“Yes, he takes great interest in the work. Uncle says that Robin is his right hand man.”

“And it is very creditable to the lad, and him a gentleman born and the owner of Birch

Dene—when he gets his rights—to be messing about among bricks and mortar. . . . I was just thinking, Miriam, as I should like to know—if you wouldn't mind telling me—when Robin fust spoke to you?"

"When Robin first spoke to me?" returned the girl, looking delightfully innocent and demure. "Let me see! Yes, I think it was shortly after I came home—one Sunday morning."

"God bless me, Miriam, so long since as that! And what said he—if it's a fair question?"

Miriam knitted her brow as if she were trying to recall the exact words.

"He said, 'Good morning, Miss Ruberry.'"

"Oh, be hanged to that tale."

"Father!"

"I did not mean—it was a twinge of this confounded gout. I mean, did he say nowt else?"

"Very likely. But you were present; you should know as well as I. It was that time he came up to ask you to get a doctor for a poor lad who had been hurt."

“Oh, that was the time, was it? But I don’t mean owt of that sort. I mean, when did he first say owt particular?”

“That is a difficult question to answer. He has said so many particular things. You must be more precise.”

“Well, then, when did you first know as you had a liking for one another?”

“That is more than I can tell you, father; for I think we liked each other before we knew it ourselves. It grew from small beginnings, and I believe is growing yet.”

“That is not it, neither; and you know quite well what I mean, I do believe. However, I’ll try to put it plain this time: did Robin and you begin a sweethearting before you knew as he was the heir, or after? Tell me the truth.”

“Certainly, father, why not?” said Miriam, with a bright blush and glistening eyes. “We have nothing to conceal. It was before.”

(“Robert was right, after all,” thought Mr. Ruberry.)

“Oh, before, was it! But suppose now, as

things was to turn out awkward (not as I think they will), and Robin was to miss getting the property, how then?"

"What do you mean by, how then? Robin would be Robin all the same, wouldn't he? And it is him I love, not the property."

"Oh, ay, he would be Robin sure enough, and as poor as one too."

"So much the better. It would be manifest then that I loved him for himself alone."

"Come now, Miriam, you don't mean that?"

"Yes, I do, father; and if it were not that Robin holds it his duty to prove beyond a doubt that he is Colonel Dene's son and no impostor, as Mrs. Dene and the trustees pretend to believe, I really doubt whether he would go on with the action."

"Not go on with the action! Why, what on earth for?"

"Because it is really against his own brother, and it does not seem kind and Christianlike for brothers to go to law."

"Why, what childish nonsense you talk!

And you used to be a sensible lass, Miriam. However, I suppose that when love comes in at the door sense flies out of the window. If Robin has any ideas of that sort, it's a good job as his interests are in safe hands. And talking of the action, I wonder when it will come off. It seems to me as if it was hanging fire a good deal. Glazebrook may be as 'safe' as they say; but there's one thing sure—he's slow."

Mr. Ruberry was so far right that the case of "Doe Dem, Roe Dene against Wagstaff" (the tenant who had been selected as the nominal defendant) did not appear to be making much progress. Since the opening of the action it had moved hardly at all, and when Mr. Glazebrook was questioned on the subject he always answered that he had not finished the pleadings, which, he explained, were rather complicated, and required to be very carefully drawn. The truth was that he was dilatory with intention—playing a waiting game. He had a good case; a case which, in ordinary circumstances, he would

have had no hesitation in bringing to a speedy issue, and which he would have backed himself to win.

But the circumstances were so far from being ordinary, that if Robin came short of success, if he failed to make good his claim, he would be pronounced guilty of fraud and branded as an impostor.

For this reason Mr. Glazebrook was desirous to make his position so strong as to render failure impossible. As yet, however, the case, fairly good as it was, had a flaw; the difficulty of explaining to the satisfaction of a jury, why Colonel Dene had made so close a secret of Robin's existence, keeping it even from his family solicitor and omitting to place anything on record whereby, in the event of his death, his son's identity might be established, had not been met. Knowing something of the character of the man, Glazebrook felt sure that he had not neglected so obvious a duty, and that, either in a letter to a friend, or otherwise, he had set down the facts and formally acknowledged Robin as his heir.

The shrewd old lawyer, moreover, hoped that the publicity which was being given to the case (it was the talk of the county) would result in the discovery of the "missing link" as he called it. Should this hope not be realized—after waiting a reasonable time—he would have to go with the case as it stood, and put his trust in the evidence which he had already obtained.

As for Robin, though the suspense was hard to bear, he was too well occupied to let it fret him overmuch, and as Mr. Ruberry had insisted on his taking up his quarters at Oaken Cleugh, he had the consolation of seeing and conversing with Miriam every day.

Then there came the trial of the rioters—at a special assizes held at Lancaster—whither Robert Ruberry, Jim Rabbits, Gib Ridings, Harker, and himself, together with many others, were subpoenaed as witnesses. And a memorable and painful trial it was, reminding Robin, in some of its incidents, of his mother's trial at the Old Bailey, and making almost as deep an impression on his mind.

Seven of the prisoners, one of whom was a woman, were condemned to death, eight or nine to transportation for life, and several others to shorter terms of transportation and imprisonment. The scene in court when these sentences were pronounced baffles description. As the dread words, "May the Lord have mercy on your souls," fell from the judge's lips, one of the victims, a wretched little apprentice only just in his teens, shrieked wildly for pity, and the wails and exclamations of the women, some of whom had travelled three score miles on foot to "take a last look" at those they loved, were so heartrending as to melt to tears even the case-hardened officers of the court.

In two instances the capital sentence was commuted to transportation for life, yet among the few that were left for execution was the little factory lad who, as the hangmen dragged him to his doom, moaned continually the same prayer, "Mother, mother! God help me!"

Robin looked on with pallid face and close-

set teeth, his heart almost bursting with indignation and pity. For he knew that these unfortunates were the victims of cruel laws and a merciless Government, that after being degraded and demoralized by incessant toil, they were provoked to crime by want and despair. And now, for the one offence of their lives, they were as severely punished as if they had been criminals by profession and evil-doers by choice.

This is no imaginary picture, the coinage of a romancer's brain. All happened as has been described—the riots, the fire, and the trial—and little more than twenty years before the accession of Queen Victoria to the throne of England, a lad of sixteen was hanged at Lancaster for alleged participation in the burning of a Lancashire cotton factory. One of his companions on the scaffold was a woman of fifty-four, whose offence was stealing some potatoes from Shudehill market during a riot at Manchester.

Nobody was more affected by the trial and its results than Robert Ruberry. It seemed

to complete that moral transformation of his character, which recent events at Birch Dene had begun.

“Let us go home,” he whispered to Robin, when the last of the prisoners had been removed from the dock.

Robin took his companion’s arm, for he looked faint and feeble, and led him slowly down the hill to the ‘King’s Arms.’ On their way thither, neither of them spoke ; their feelings just then were too deep for words. When they reached the inn, Robert Ruberry sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands, as if to shut out some dreadful sight.

“Ay, let us go home,” he repeated. “I shall never get over this, Robin. I used to talk about hanging as if it did not amount to much. I know what it means now. The cry of that poor lad will ring in my ears till my dying day. His blood will be on my head. God forgive me ! If I had behaved a bit kinder to him—and he wasn’t a bad lad—and treated th’ hands like human beings, this

would never have happened. But I never thought it would come to this, Robin. If you'll believe me, I never did. . . . If it had lain with me, they would not have been prosecuted. But th' Crown took it up, and though I was like to give evidence, I said as little as ever I could."

This was true. His evidence had helped the prosecution hardly at all, and he positively refused to identify any of the men who had sought his life. But for the "Blackfaces" and the leaders who betrayed them, after luring them to their ruin, the prisoners would, in all probability, have been acquitted.

By way of consoling the stricken man, Robin called his attention to this side of the question, and said something about the iniquity of the law and the severity of the judge. But Robert Ruberry refused to see in this any extenuation of his conduct.

"Ay, th' law is bad enough to have been made by devils," he said. "But what by that? Haven't I been saying all my life as ours is the finest constitution under the

sun, and denouncing all who wanted to reform it as traitors and rebels? As for the judge—I wonder how he can sleep in his bed o' nights. But he's what the law has made him and I'm no better. It is no use talking, Robin, I'm no better Ay, let us go home, I cannot bide here any longer. Order the post chaise, and find Jim Rabbits, he can ride on th' box. And there's some women yon' fro' Birch Dene. Take this five-pound note, and tell Jim to order 'em a good dinner and let 'em ride home on th' coach."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MISSING LINK.

THE trial of the rioters was followed by a period of comparative calm, for albeit the condition of the factory folks was in no way improved they were completely over-awed, and most of their leaders either in hiding or in gaol. The Government, regarding this as a favourable sign, thought it expedient to relax somewhat the rigour of their rule, an opportunity by which Robert Ruberry profited to make still another effort to obtain Romford's release. But instead of applying as before to the Manchester chief constable, he addressed himself to the County members, who, believing him to be still the good old Tory he always had been, did their best to forward his views. He also sought, through

Robin, the co-operation of Mr. Chubb, who had powerful friends in the administration. The joint efforts of these intercessors were crowned with success, and a few weeks later Robert Ruberry received an intimation that William Romford would be discharged from custody almost immediately. This was followed by a letter from the Radical weaver himself, stating that he was to be set free on the following day, and that the Government were behaving well; they had given him a small gratuity and the amount of his coach fare to Manchester. But having been so long locked up he had a great longing to stretch his legs, and take a big breath of country air. So he meant to walk home, and "save the brass." He expected to reach "th' far end" towards the end of the week, but as prison life was not conducive to good fettle he could not be "rightly sure" to a day or two.

This was disappointing to Romford's numerous friends and admirers, for they would have liked to give him a public welcome and escort the returning hero, "flags flying and music

playing," to his own house. But as there was no telling at what hour of the day or night he might come, this project had to be abandoned. All the same, a sharp look-out was kept on the Manchester road, and Rupert Ravensmere called on Mrs. Romford, and asked her to send him word the moment her husband arrived.

"I'll send Will hissel, Mr. Ravensmere," she answered in a voice tremulous with joyful excitement. "I'll send him fust thing, unless he torns up late at neet, as he very like will. You may be sure as there's nobody he'll tak' so much pleasure in seeing as yo' as has been so good to me while he wor' away. I'm reyt sorry as he's walking. It's a most terrible long way fro' Lunnon, and him wake wi' living on skilly and such like, and getting neyther exercise nor fresh air. And there wor no need for him to walk. But he is a gradely kindly lad is my Will; he thinks I have been hard put to it and wants to bring a bit o' brass home wi' him. But he doesn't know as Robert Ruberry continued th' allowance as I had fro'

your father. I did not like taking it, at th' fost, and if it had not been for yo' 'suading me I shouldn't ha' done. Well, what wi' that and th' weyving I've saved—how much thinken yo'?"

"I really couldn't tell, Mrs. Romford. I have no idea."

"Guess!"

"Well, perhaps a couple of pounds."

"Five! A fi'pun note."

"Five pounds! Why, what a thrifty little woman you are! But where do you put it? Aren't you afraid of being robbed?"

"No, I'm not. I put it where nobody can find it. Where thinken yo'?"

"In that chest?"

"Nay, that would be th' fost place where onybody would look. I'll show yo', but yo' musn't tell—"

"Certainly not. I'll be as secret as the grave."

"Look under th' bed."

Robin looked.

"I see nothing but a child's shoe," he said.

“And there is nowt else. But see you, now!”

With that Mrs. Romford put her arm under the bed and pulled out the shoe. Then with her forefinger she extracted therefrom a piece of crumpled paper, which on being unfolded proved to be a five-pound note.

“There now!” she exclaimed, holding it up in triumph. “Don’t yo’ think it’s safe?”

“As safe as if it was in a bank,” said Robin. “Why, you are quite rich!”

“I shall be when my dear lad comes home. He’s sure to bring a pound or two wi’ him. And I’ll tell you what—we’ll have a supper—roast goose. I know where there’s a gradely thumper as I can get cheap. Not as it’s roasted yet, but it will have to be. Roast goose and barm dumplings. Will you come? You’re a gentleman now, I know, and we are nobbut poor folks, only I thowt——”

“I’ll come with pleasure, Mrs. Romford. When is it to be?”

“Let me see. Next Saturday neet—no, next but one. There’ll be Jim Rabbits

and th' wife, and yo' and us—nobody else, unless—”

“Yes, unless what, Mrs. Romford?” said Robin, seeing that she hesitated.

“Unless you think—if I might make so bowd—Miss Ruberry would come wi' you. I should be gradely fain if hoo would do us th' favver.”

“I think she would,” returned Robin with a smile. “I'm almost sure she would. I'll ask her.”

“That is aw reyt, and thank yo' kindly, for if yo' ax her, I'm sure hoo'll come. That'll just mak' six, and if we don't manage to eat th' goose among us, and about fifteen dump-lings as weel, it'll be a quare do. . . . Do you know, I've gotten into my yed as Will'll be here o' Saturday neet. I know he will if he can, and if he is I'll send him up to yo' i' good time o' Sunday.”

Mrs. Romford's prevision was confirmed by the event. Her husband did return on the Saturday night; and on the following morning he appeared at Oaken Cleugh, looking rather

pale and worn, yet in fair health and good spirits.

Robin and he exchanged warm greetings, but Robert Ruberry kept in the background, and his face was troubled.

“Won’t you two shake hands?” said Robin.

“I shall be very glad,” said Robert, “but I did you a great wrong, Romford, and I feared—”

“You mean as you geet me sent to prison ; but you geet me out again, and you’ve been good to th’ wife. That is enough for me, and folks speak as well of you now as they used to speak ill. I’m not one as bears grudges. And, after all, I’m not sure as you didn’t do me a good turn in getting me taken up. If you hadn’t I should have been among th’ rioters—though not of them—for I hate violence, and as sure as we’re alive some o’ them Blackfaces would have sworn my life away. Ay, let’s shake hands, by all means. We have summat to forget and forgive, every one on us. And so your father is dead, Mr.

Ravensmere! I am right sorry, for he was a kind neighbour and a noble gentleman. I only heard about a fortnight since. I was shifted about from prison to prison, and my letters went wrong. If I had heard sooner I might have saved you some trouble. Th' last time I saw him—you mind when—he gave me a bit o' papper for you. Here it is" (handing Robin a sealed letter). "We had a long talk, and he told me what I may say I knew already, that you were his son and heir, but he wanted me to say nowt about it for a few months on account of his wife's health. I promised, of course, though I do not quite understand his scruples. If I had been in his place I should have owned you at once. My wife isn't a fine lady, thank God. She never ails much even at them times, and does not know what nerves is. And then I chanced to say that it might be awkward for you if owt happened to him before he made it known. He said the same thought had occurred to him, and he would provide for that chance at once. And then

he sat down at his desk and wrote out that papper, and signed it, and asked me to attest his signature, which I did, as you will see. His first idea was to lock it up in his desk, along with his other private pappers, but at th' last minute he changed his mind.

“‘It might get overlooked,’ he said, ‘or fall into careless hands. You are my son’s friend, I confide it to you. Give it to him, either now or later, as you may think best. I don’t think I am likely to die just yet. But life is uncertain, and the worst thing a man can leave to those he loves is a legacy of trouble. I will instruct Pomeroy to add a codicil to my will the next time I go to Manchester, but meanwhile that document will suffice.’

“I took it home and put it in my old kist [chest] thinking to give it to you the next time you called, but as ill luck would have it, the head constable called before you.”

Silently and in tears—for the weaver’s narrative had revived the poignancy of his grief—Robin broke the seal and read the

paper. It began by saying that, in view of the uncertainty of life, and there being reasons why the disclosure should not be publicly made for some little time, the writer desired to place on record the fact that the young man known as Rupert or Robin Nelson was his son by a previous marriage, and that a certificate of this marriage and proof of the birth would be found among the other family papers in his cabinet. He then went on to explain briefly how he had lost sight of his wife and child, and come erroneously to the conclusion that they had been drowned in the Thames, and why, owing to the partial loss of Rupert's memory, following on a brain fever, they had not sooner found each other. As to Rupert Nelson (so called) being his son, there could, he said, be not the least doubt. The account he gave of their life at Lulworth was true in every respect, and he had told him of many things which could be known to none save themselves. Colonel Dene concluded with the expression of a hope that in the event of its being necessary to "produce

this plain statement," the trustees, his wife, and all his friends would have no hesitation in recognizing Rupert Ravensmere Dene as his elder son and rightful heir.

"Will it be of any use in this law as is going on?" asked Romford; "for though I witnessed it I did not read it."

"Of very great use," answered Robin. "It is what Mr. Glazebrook has been looking for this long time. It completes our case and ought to make a trial unnecessary. At any rate, I hope it will. How good of my father to make so full a statement, and I'm greatly obliged to you, Romford, for suggesting the idea to him."

"Well, I don't know. I dare say he would ha' made it all th' same, and a man shouldn't want his memory jogging about a thing o' that soort. Duty isn't all o' one side between parents and children; if there be any difference it's agen th' parents, though some folks doesn't think so. A child cannot help being born, but a mon needn't be a fayther, nor a woman a mother, unless they like. As for

being obliged to me, happen the less as is said about that the better. It worn't vary sharp on me to keep th' knowledge o' that paper to mysel' all this time. But it's not too late yet, you say, and better late than never."

This was exactly what Glazebrook observed when Robin gave him his father's statement, which he did on the following day. The old lawyer called it "the missing link," and said it made their case so strong, that if the other side knew all the facts they would probably "throw up the sponge."

"Why not tell them all the facts then, and so put an end to the strife?" asked Robin.

"For several reasons, my dear sir. To begin with, it is contrary to all the rules of the game—once proceedings have begun—to show your opponent your hand. And as your character has been publicly assailed so it must be publicly vindicated. Why, in the very last *Guardian*, it is given as a positive fact that the action of 'Doe Dem, Roe Dene against

Wagstaff,' has been abandoned, and more than insinuated that the plaintiff is an impostor. Another reason. It is well for you, well even for the trustees, that your claim should be examined by a court of justice and ratified—as I take for granted it will be—by the verdict of a jury."

"I am in your hands, Mr. Glazebrook, and I think you are right. When do you propose to bring the matter to an issue?"

"At the next Lancaster assizes, three months hence, before a special jury. The pleadings are all but ready, and I do not suppose that Mr. Pomeroy is likely to put any hindrances in the way."

CHAPTER XIX.

ROBIN'S CHOICE.

THREE months later a rather mixed company were gathered under the roof of the old "King's Arms" (now, alas, among the things that have been) and at another ancient hostel, hard by. Besides the usual frequenters of the house—during the assizes barristers, attorneys, deputy sheriffs and other major and minor limbs of the law—there were the plaintiff and the defendants in the suit of "Doe Dem, Roe Dene against Wagstaff," their solicitors and their solicitors' clerks, Mrs. Dene, Miss Ruberry and her father, Mr. Chubb, Dr. Yockleton and Solomon Slow, Will Romford, and Harker, three or four people from Lulworth, and two eminent physicians from Manchester, who

were ready to swear that cases of partial loss of memory, after brain fever, were of common occurrence.

Robert Ruberry had not come. He said that, unless he were forced, he would never enter Lancaster Castle again, but on the day before their departure he had a long talk with Miriam and Robin, which led to important consequences later on.

The lovers met Mrs. Dene two or three times, both in the corridors of the inn and the precincts of the castle; but she held her head high, and did not condescend to notice them even with a look.

The Nisi Prius Court house was crowded, for the suit bid fair to be a *cause célèbre*, and among the advocates engaged therein were several legal luminaries of the first magnitude. The trustees had specially retained the Attorney General, while the plaintiff's leading counsel was no less a personage than Sir Slingsby Slasher, who had the reputation of being the most successful verdict winner of the day. Rather to Robin's surprise, however, he did

not make a slashing speech. Quite the contrary, in fact, for he spoke in a quiet, subdued, colloquial tone, very soothing to the feelings, and much more effective with the jury than a set oration would have been. He metaphorically buttonholed them; his manner was so insinuating and confidential that they could not possibly help thinking for the moment that he and they were about the most knowing fellows in the world; and the way in which, from time to time, he said, "I need not tell you, gentlemen," was simply inimitable.

But the evidence was the main thing, and there was fortunately plenty of it. Robin himself was the first witness examined, and though he stood two hours in the box, and though Mr. Rufus (one of the Attorney General's juniors) asked him all the unpleasant things he could think of, and was very sarcastic and scornful touching his temporary loss of memory, he came well out of the ordeal. Next, the witnesses from Lulworth delivered their testimony, and to them

followed Chubb, Yockleton, Solomon Slow, and the others. Romford was the last, and Sir Slingsby Slasher so contrived matters that the weaver's evidence and the "putting in" of Colonel Dene's "statement" came as the finishing stroke, and when he said, "That is my case," and sat down with a "Didn't I tell you so?" glance at the jury, he knew that the case was won.

He did not, however, expect that the verdict would be delivered before the following day, and probably no one was more surprised than himself when, just as the Attorney General was rising to address them, the foreman of the jury put a question to the judge, which caused the learned gentleman to resume his seat with a gesture of disgust and a look of dismay.

"Do you think there's any use in going on wi' this, my lord?" asked the foreman, a stalwart, shrewd-faced farmer from Grange-over-Sands.

"I beg your pardon," said the judge, politely, "but really I don't quite understand

the question. Would you kindly be a little more explicit?"

"Well, what we want to know is, if it be of any use going on—because, unless it can be shown as that statement is a forgery we are of opinion that the plaintiff has proved his case, and we shall give a verdict accordingly."

"That is not a point which I can decide. If the defendants elect to go on with the case, we must hear it to the end. Perhaps, in the circumstances, you had better take the opinion of your clients, Mr. Attorney General."

On this the Attorney General, Mr. Pomeroy, and the trustees held a hurried consultation.

"Well, what say you, Sir Charles!" asked the judge, when they seemed to have made up their minds.

"My clients desire me to say, my lord, that they have no personal feeling or pecuniary interest in the matter whatever. They could not decide it on their own authority alone, but as the jury are of opinion that the plaintiff has proved his case, and I am not prepared to say that he has not, my clients are willing

to let the case close now, with a verdict in his favour. There remains only the question of costs—”

“There will be no difficulty on that score,” put in Sir Slingsby Slasher. “Mr. Ravensmere Dene is quite willing, desirous even, that the costs should be borne by the estate.”

This was the end of the case of Doe Dem, Roe Dene against Wagstaff, so far as the legal proceedings were concerned, but what may be termed the final settlement and general wind up took place out of court.

An hour or two later, as the trustees and Mr. Pomeroy were talking over the events of the day in their sitting-room at the “King’s Arms,” one of the servants brought a note from Mr. Ravensmere Dene, asking for an interview, as he had something of importance to communicate.

“You have no objection, I presume?” said Mr. Pomeroy, addressing the trustees. “As the fight is over we may as well be friendly, and as the family solicitors, it behoves us to be on good terms with its head.”

“Let us see him by all means,” said Mr. Giles; “I shall be delighted to make his acquaintance, and I hope he will give our house his account.”

“So shall I,” echoed Mr. Tilbury, “and I hope we shall be good neighbours. There is some very fine shooting on the Birch Dene moors.”

“Give our compliments to Mr. Dene,” said Pomeroy to the servant, “and say that we shall feel honoured by his company whenever it suits his convenience to pay us a visit. Or stay, I will write a note. It will be more respectful than a verbal message.”

A few minutes after the missive was despatched, Robin, accompanied by Mr. Glazebrook, answered it in person.

“I have come to make a proposal,” he said, after the usual commonplaces had been exchanged, “and as it affects the interests of my brother, I should like to make it in the presence of Mrs. Dene,—if she would favour us with her company for a few minutes.”

“She is in her room, I will go and fetch

her," replied Pomeroy, albeit not very confidently, for he greatly doubted whether she would oblige them with her company.

But curiosity prevailed over resentment, and he presently returned with the lady on his arm. She looked very downcast and had evidently been weeping. After greeting Robin with a scarcely perceptible nod, Mrs. Dene sank sullenly into a chair and leaned her head on her hand.

Without any further preface Robin proceeded to business.

"I need hardly say," he observed, "that I am very well satisfied with the result of our action. It makes me the possessor of a fine property, and what I value much more highly, gives me a name and a position, and vindicates the fair fame of my mother and the character of my father. As touching the property, however, I think it gives me more than is rightly my due. Willy Dene is as much my father's son as myself, and it does not seem fair that I should take the lion's share. But as I am only life tenant, I cannot dispose

of the property as I would, yet what I can do I will, and I intend to make over to him, so long as I have the power, or to trustees acting on his behalf—that is to say, during my lifetime—one half of the income arising from the property, and to leave Mrs. Dene in undisturbed possession of Birch Hall, with an allowance of a thousand a year, in addition to her settlement. Her lawyers will put the matter into proper shape. That is my proposal.”

“And a very noble and generous proposal,” exclaimed Pomeroy, warmly; “all the more so as your brother’s portion would otherwise be very inadequate, and his mother has by no means a large settlement. Do you understand, Mrs. Dene? Mr. Dene will convey to your son an entire moiety of the rental of the estate and make you further an allowance of a thousand a year. He deserves our heartiest thanks.”

“And I do thank him,” said Mrs. Dene, rising from her chair and offering Robin her hand. “I have thought ill of you and spoken ill of you, for until to-day I would not—could

not believe that your claim was genuine. But now I ask your forgiveness and tender you my thanks, my warmest thanks for this great generosity. It would have been better for us all if my husband had been more frank with me. He meant to be kind, I dare say, but it was very mistaken kindness. However, that is all past, and I trust that for the future we shall be good friends."

She spoke fairly and her manner was not ungracious, yet Robin fancied that if she had spoken all her mind she would have said that, though she preferred half a loaf to no bread, she still considered that her son was morally entitled to the entire loaf, and the imputation of blame to his father grated on his feelings.

But as Robin wanted peace and could afford to be generous, he took her hand and assured her that, so far as it depended on him, their re-cemented friendship should never be broken again.

"You are good enough to say, Mr. Dene," observed Mr. Pomeroy, "you are good enough to say, that you will leave Mrs. Dene and your

brother in undisturbed possession of Dene Hall. It is very kind of you, I am sure, but where, then, may I ask, if it be not an impertinent question, do you intend to reside yourself? I think I heard a whisper that—ahem—that there was some likelihood of your leading a certain fair lady to the hymeneal altar?”

“Yes. I think it is very likely that I shall be married before very long—and as for a house—I intend to fit up the Old Hall (an ancient moated mansion, about a mile from Oaken Cleugh, latterly used as a farm house) and live there. The situation is very convenient—near the factory I mean—and I prefer the active life of a manufacturer to the more tranquil existence of a country gentleman. The new mill which Mr. Robert Ruberry is building will be much larger than the old one, and, though he will retain an interest in the business and give me the benefit of his advice, I shall be the principal partner and sole manager. I like having to do with machinery and workpeople. I don't think I could find

a more congenial occupation, and I cannot be idle."

"And Mr. Ruberry?"

"He will retire from business and devote himself to country pursuits. And, now, what do you say to celebrating the settlement of our differences in the way customary with Englishmen? Will you all honour me with your company at dinner this evening?"

On this all present declared that nothing would give them greater pleasure.

Robin wanted to include in the party all the witnesses without exception, both gentle and simple, but Romford asked to be excused.

"You are very kind, Mr. Dene; but if it's all the same to you I'd rayther not."

"Why?"

"Well, to begin with, I have not a wedding garment; and I don't think as Mrs. Dene and them lawyers and trustees would like to sit down wi' a radical weyver; and, what is more, I wouldn't like to sit down with them. They're rank old Tories, every one on 'em. But I'll tell you what we'll do, if you like. Mr. Slow and

me, and two or three more on us will dine at your expense at the 'Shoulder o' Mutton'—"

"But Slow will dine with us!"

"Not for choice. He says as he prefers the society of the free and easy to the company of the polished and polite. I've yerd, too, as he sings a good song; and as I can do a bit i' that line mysel', we shall have a fine time on't—better than you! I don't think as Giles and Tilbury could sing a song between 'em to save their souls, and you mut as well try to make a sucking pig whistle th' Doxology as get music out o' them leather-faced old lawyers. It will be a deal comfortabler for everybody. What sayen yo'?"

"As I want everybody to be comfortable, I say, yes!"

"That's aw reyt then, and we shall not forget to drink your health and wish you and her much happiness."

Shortly before the dinner hour Mr. Chubb drew Robin aside.

"I shall have to leave to-night on my way south," he said, "and as I may not have

another opportunity of speaking to you, I would like your instructions about this money I'm to have next week from Weevil."

"You think the old villain will pay up?"

"I am sure; because if he doesn't he will be sold up first and locked up afterwards, and he knows a good deal better than that."

"Three thousand four hundred, I think you said, was the amount."

"As nearly as possible, of which five hundred will go to Solomon Slow; and then there are the smaller legacies and expenses."

"Of course. Well, you may remit me the balance in a draft on some Manchester banker. But I shall not spend the money on myself. I mean to devote it to a purpose of which, I am sure, our dear old friend Bartlett would highly approve."

"And what is that, pray?"

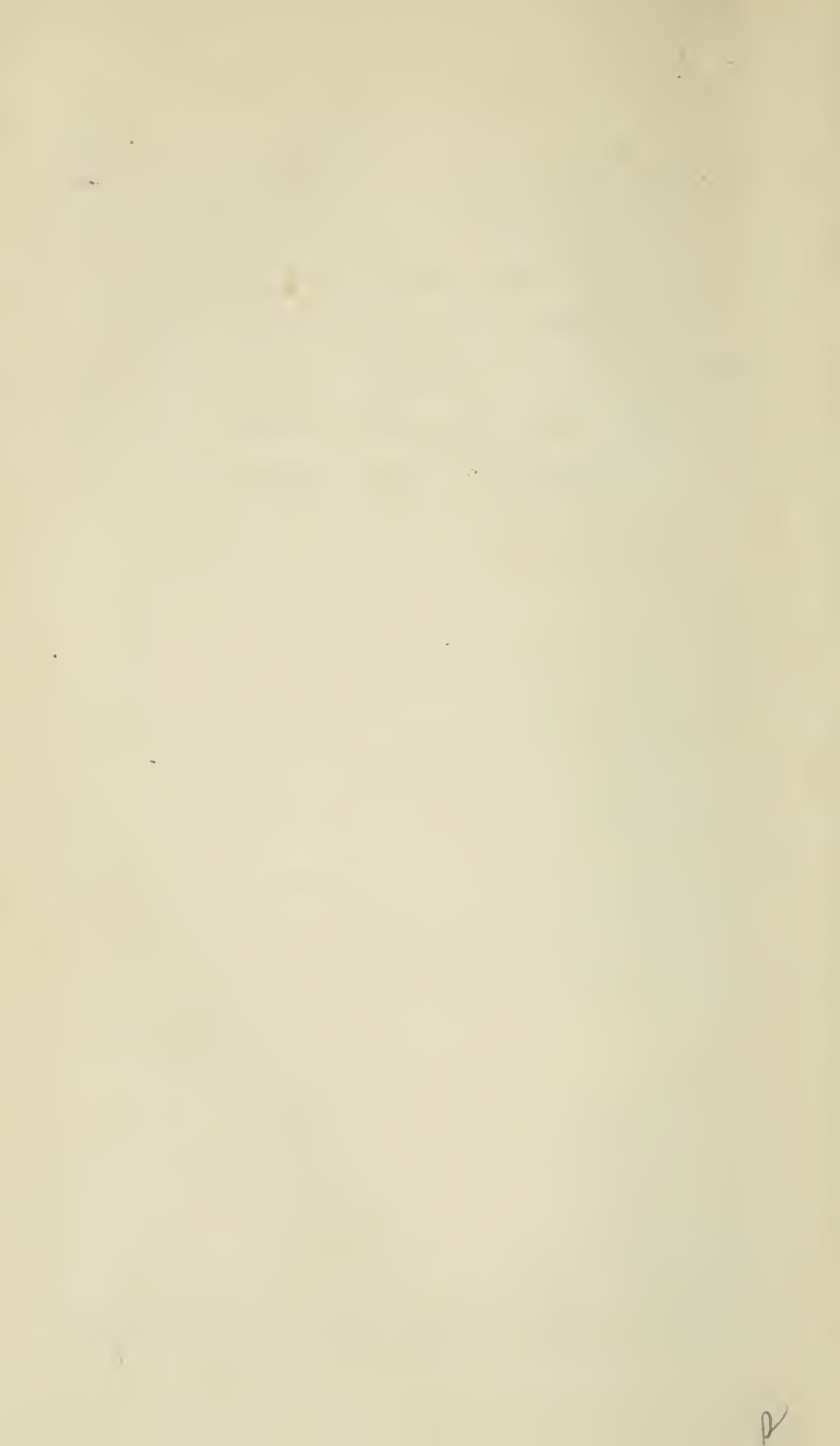
"The building and endowment of a free school and library at Birch Dene."

"You are quite right. The money could not be more usefully applied. To combat ignorance is to combat vice. Your career, so

far, has been a very remarkable one, Mr. Dene, but we may almost say, I think, that the story of it ends with to-day's *dénoûement*."

"The first part of it, Mr. Chubb," answered Robin, gravely. "My life as a waif ends with this trial; but the second part—my life and work as a man—begins only from to-day."

THE END.





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